

U.S. MILITARY  
ENGAGEMENT  
IN THE BROADER  
MIDDLE EAST

JAMES F. JEFFREY  
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Photo: An F-16 from the Egyptian Air Force prepares to make contact with a KC-135 from the 336th ARS during in-flight refueling training. (USAF photo by Staff Sgt. Amy Abbott)

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# Acknowledgments

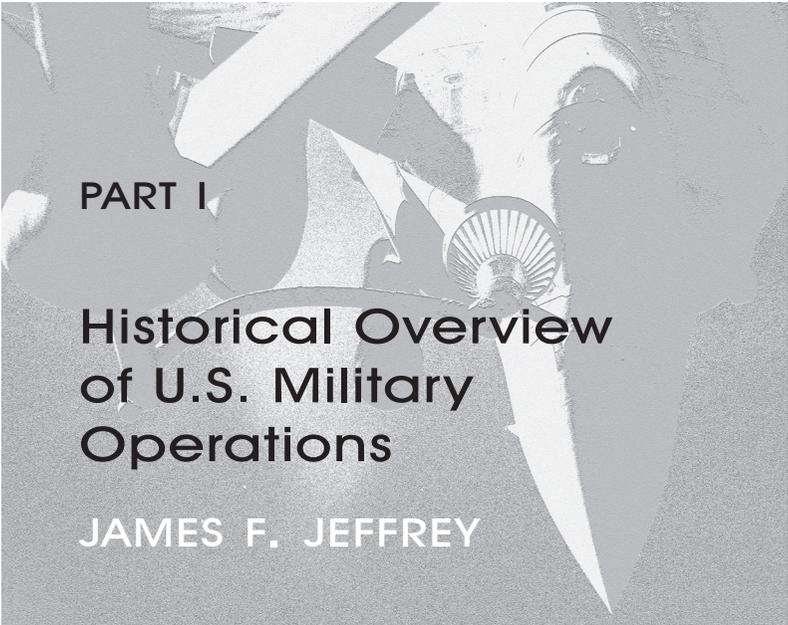
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—James F. Jeffrey

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—Michael Eisenstadt





**PART I**

**Historical Overview  
of U.S. Military  
Operations**

**JAMES F. JEFFREY**



1.

## Introduction to Part I

THIS STUDY EXAMINES the role of the U.S. military and military force in carrying out U.S. Middle East policy from 1945 until the present. U.S. military operations and deployments are first inventoried, and then evaluated as to their success individually, using primarily military criteria, along with their political impact in advancing America's strategy for the region.

To make sense of specific military activities, they must be placed in the larger context of grand strategy, reflecting underlying interests and major approaches for achieving them. In the Middle East, strategy has been first and foremost a regional manifestation of the U.S. grand strategy since World War II: to build, and defend, a liberal international order. That order traditionally promoted both internal liberalization and regional calm and stability, but the Middle East has been an exception. Therefore, in contrast to the Balkans, Southeast Asia, or Central America, the U.S. military, even when successful, has only limited the impact of the region's underlying violence and instability. In contrast to other regions, the relative calm and opportunities for global integration provided by a U.S. security umbrella have not significantly furthered the region's integration into the global community or helped "calm" the region's demons. In such a case, where U.S. commitments have had to be long term in the face of great uncertainty, the military tools essential to even maintaining the quasi-"normal" state of the region must be up to the task, without overly straining U.S. resources and political will. Therefore, this study examines these tools from the various perspectives

just noted and draws certain conclusions about what has worked and what has not.

While domestic skepticism and even opposition to U.S. military activities in the Middle East have ebbed and flowed, they reached a peak by 2008–12 in public polling, election results, and the Obama administration’s attitudes and policies. The administration’s reluctance to use military force was based on a firm belief by President Obama and top officials that, to quote the president, “since World War II, some of our most costly mistakes came not from our restraint, but from our willingness to rush into military adventures.”<sup>1</sup> Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken reiterated the same point in reference to the Middle East eighteen months later: “But we cannot deny the lessons we’ve learned over a decade of sacrifice about the effectiveness and sustainability of indefinite and undefined military interventions that have vast unintended consequences.”<sup>2</sup> In view of the continuing threats to regional security stemming from the Middle East, dramatically manifested in the fall of 2015 with unprecedented refugee flows from the region, Islamic State terrorist attacks around the world, and a dangerous Russian military engagement in Syria, it is urgent as well as important to examine what the military can and cannot do based upon our experience in this region.

2.

## Basic Principles

U.S. GRAND STRATEGY since the onset of the Cold War, reflecting dominant themes in American foreign policy dating to World War I, has focused on establishing and managing a global security system to contain and deter outside threats to the system. Given Eurasia's demographic and economic/technical strength, a dominant power or powers arising from that region, using modern military technology, could eventually project power against the United States by penetrating the barrier of the two great oceans.

This geostrategic logic was complemented by moral and philosophical values. As citizens of the economically and financially—and soon militarily—strongest nation in the world by the early 1900s, many influential Americans thought a United States so blessed should use its unique power to spread a law-based international peace order that would serve not only U.S. security interests but also the moral calling for a modern, humanistic, global political system that would eventually ban war.<sup>3</sup>

At the conclusion of World War II, most of these themes found their place in the Charter of the United Nations. More realistically, the rapid breakdown of that immediate postwar order due to Soviet expansionism led to a defense-oriented reinterpretation of the basic U.S. philosophy to contain strategic competitors and maintain a global system behind this deterrence. George Kennan, in both his famous *Long Telegram* and his X article in *Foreign Affairs*, thus provided this intellectual foundation for U.S. foreign policy to oppose the Soviet Union: “If the [Soviets’]

adversary [i.e., the United States] has sufficient force and makes clear his readiness to use it, he rarely has to do so.”<sup>4, 5</sup>

This global strategy focused U.S. efforts on

- ▣ developing, maintaining—e.g., through global economic integration led by international institutions—defending, and expanding where possible a Western “world order”; and
- ▣ promoting democracy, rule of law, and human rights within its member states, while “waiting out” the fall of communism.

Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, this framework has remained the basis of U.S. strategy. From the late 1980s on, U.S. policy focused on regional challenges. These could not threaten the United States or world order, but, if left unchallenged, could call into question the universality of the global system and thus its legitimacy. This was not just a matter of pride for the United States. One of its persistent goals was for international beneficiaries of the order to bear more of the “maintenance” burden and the United States less. But that required both a high degree of legitimacy “beyond” simply a pseudo-American hegemony as well as security as a moral right everywhere, not just where the United States thought it important.

This approach produced U.S.-led international coalitions post-1989 to cope with regional challenges from Colombia and North Korea to the Balkans and Middle East. With the demise of the Serbian challenge after 1999, most of the remaining regional threats to international order were in the broader Middle East, including Iran, Iraq, the al-Qaeda movement, and various other state and substate actors, such as Libya, Syria, and other terrorist movements. The U.S.-led campaign against these threats, on full throttle after 9/11, reflected both the regional application of the general principle and attention to a specific region with more than its share of violence and threats to international order. (In this paper, the Middle East is defined as the Arab world, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the African side of the Red Sea down to Somalia.)

The reasons for the persistent Middle East insecurity have been long debated,<sup>6, 7</sup> particularly in *The 9-11 Commission Report*,<sup>8</sup> and the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014 generated various new efforts to understand why this region is so different from others.<sup>9</sup> The “standard” U.S. strategy of relying on local partners to carry the burden after an initial U.S.

intervention has been less successful in this region than elsewhere. Local states, with few exceptions (Turkey, Israel, and Iran), were artificial to some degree, with their claims on the loyalty of their citizens challenged by both the latter's particularistic identification (family, clan, tribe, region, religious or sectarian group) and by messianic Islamic pan-regional movements, most recently IS, al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the *velayat-e faqih* doctrine of Iran. Consequently, a United States condemned to "play" in the region for legitimate security interests found that neither "in-out," as in the Balkans, nor reliance on local allies, as in NATO, "solved" the Middle East dynamic. Rather, the United States was compelled not only to intervene dozens of times in the region but to try repeatedly and never fully successfully to package intervention within one or another strategic framework.

3.

## U.S. Strategy in the Middle East

AMONG the important phases of Washington's regional approach since World War II have been its emergent direct involvement in the later twentieth century, the dramatic intervention under the second Bush administration, and the striking shift in the other direction under President Obama.

### U.S. Interests

At the highest level, U.S. strategic goals in the Middle East have reflected, as in all other regions, local application of the just-discussed fundamental foreign policy, along with U.S. historical experience in the region, region-specific U.S. interests, and events compelling adjustment of that foreign policy. Thus, any review of strategy should begin with an inventory of key U.S. regional interests. President Obama provided such a listing in his September 2013 UN General Assembly speech, and drew on them again to justify military deployments against the Islamic State in 2014:

- We will confront external aggression against our allies and partners, as we did in the Gulf War.
- We will ensure the free flow of energy from the region to the world..
- We will dismantle terrorist networks that threaten our people...
- And finally, we will not tolerate the development or use of weapons of mass destruction.

Such a concept of U.S. interests has shaped U.S. involvement in the region since World War II. Seventy years ago, the same two positive goals—oil and allies—were equally relevant, while the threat at that time was not WMD and terrorism but the Soviet Union and, secondarily, various aggressive local actors.

## Beginnings

Following World War II, the “alliance piece” of U.S. Middle East strategy was complicated because our partners, excepting the only two fully independent states, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, were not so much local rulers but instead Britain and France, which then dominated Eurasia’s southern tier from Gibraltar to Hong Kong. During World War II, Washington was skeptical of the strategic value of the Middle East and looked askance at these allies’ efforts to reestablish control once the war had ended. The United States saw the region’s future in the hands not of British and French colonialists but in those of local rulers.<sup>10</sup> Protection of America’s oil company interests, and missionary efforts, was also a factor. The region’s importance in the postwar world was signaled by President Roosevelt’s meeting, on returning from the Yalta Conference, with Saudi King Abdulaziz on the USS *Quincy*.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, the threat of Soviet penetration in the eastern Mediterranean and northern perimeter of the Middle East, along with Britain’s admission in 1946 that it could not contain the Soviets alone, pulled in the United States. The United States responded with alacrity, from the dispatch of the USS *Missouri* to Istanbul as a show of force in spring 1946<sup>12</sup> to the issuance almost a year later of the Truman Doctrine, the core of which is set forth here in the president’s words:

I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way. I believe that our help should be primarily through economic and financial aid which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes.<sup>13</sup>

This statement was followed up by joint political and covert action with the British against the Soviets’ Azeri and Kurdish proxies in Iran.

By 1948, the situation, at least in the Middle East, had calmed, with all Soviet threats pushed back. But two developments in the 1940s beyond the initial containment actions would define the U.S. role in the region for decades: First, the Truman administration recognized Israel in 1948. Second, facing Western European economic collapse, due in part to communist agitation among left-leaning coal miners in Britain and on the continent in 1946–47,<sup>14</sup> the United States pushed its European partners to shift energy requirements partially to Gulf oil.

## The Indirect Approach

The 1950s and 1960s saw the United States preoccupied with global containment in other, more familiar theaters. The main U.S. security interest in the region once the above-cited 1946 Soviet probes were contained was to develop a string of bases from Morocco and Libya to Pakistan to strengthen deterrence and project power—by hosting intelligence-collection sites and nuclear-armed bombers and missile forces targeting the USSR. Turkey played a key role, sending a highly regarded combat brigade to the Korean War, allowing extensive U.S. basing, and then joining NATO.

Containing possible Soviet encroachment in the Middle East became an uneasy division of labor between the United States and Britain. (After initial postwar efforts to undermine pro-Western states, the USSR between the late 1940s and the 1979 march into Afghanistan limited itself to supporting friendly regimes such as Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, as well as communist parties.) Yet Britain, along with France, was interested as much in maintaining influence in a decolonializing region as dealing with Soviet encroachments. Thus, the United States worked with Britain to overthrow the government of Iranian prime minister Muhammad Mossedeq in 1953, based, on the U.S. part at least, on fear of a pro-communist regime. The United States also supported the Baghdad Pact, later renamed (after Iraq left) the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), whose members included Britain, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan but none of the region's Arab states after Iraq. The limit of U.S. cooperation with the colonial powers was reached during the 1956 Suez Crisis, which saw Washington pressure Britain, France, and Israel to back down. But while Washington was reluctant to support colonial struggles, stability mattered, and the United States had tools to promote it. The U.S. Sixth

Fleet dominated the Mediterranean, and President Dwight Eisenhower used it to deploy 30,000 U.S. ground troops to Lebanon in 1958 to calm internal strife.

By the 1960s, the strategic terrain had shifted, with the Soviet Union's close security relations with the three "Arab socialist" military-led states confronting Israel—Syria, Iraq, and Egypt—giving it influence in the region, and Britain abandoning its security responsibilities in the Gulf region by 1969.<sup>15,16</sup> With the British essentially out, the United States not fully in, and the Soviets advancing, the region was gradually transformed into a three-way balance: (1) the Soviet-backed military states—Egypt, Syria, Iraq, eventually Libya (and, further afield, Algeria); (2) Israel, locked in conflict with the Soviet-backed states; and (3) the Gulf monarchies, along with Iran, Jordan, Morocco, and (until Qadhafi's ascent) Libya, as well as democratic Turkey and Pakistan, all more or less allied with the United States and Britain in over-the-horizon mode. U.S. policy was framed then by the Nixon Doctrine—relying on the third group as informal partners to maintain their own security with the United States in an oversight role.

## **U.S. Fully In**

Dramatic events between 1973 and 1979 provoked a total change of U.S. engagement from over-the-horizon to direct involvement in regional security. The trigger was the crisis generated by the Yom Kippur War, which touched on all the major U.S. regional interests—Israel's fate, the future of the Arab world, Soviet mischief making, and, before the crisis was over, the security of oil supplies. The United States quickly saw that in an emergency situation it could not influence events from afar. In reacting, first with an emphasis on military action and threat, then with a sophisticated diplomatic effort, the United States saw not only disaster averted but U.S. influence and power in the region hugely increased.<sup>17</sup>

While U.S. engagement in the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict was limited, the 1973 war confronted America with the possibility that Russian-equipped and diplomatically supported Egypt and Syria could defeat Israel, by 1973 a de facto U.S. ally largely armed by the United States. Nixon eventually responded with a massive airlift of weapons and munitions that turned the tide toward Israel.<sup>18</sup> When the revitalized Israeli army then threatened to overrun the remnants of the Egyptian army,

the Soviet Union decided it had to support Egypt and alerted airborne forces to deploy to the region. Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger upped the ante, placing the entire U.S. defense establishment on high alert.<sup>19</sup> The Soviets backed down, and these dramatic, major, and risky U.S. military actions, albeit short of combat, paved the way for American diplomacy.

But another outcome of the Yom Kippur War had a different immediate effect on the United States—the oil embargo by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Enacted in part by Arab states to protest U.S. support for Israel, the embargo, which drastically increased the cost of oil, was soon embraced by the rest of OPEC. At least temporarily, OPEC succeeded. The resulting economic dislocation, both in the United States and among European and Asian allies even more dependent, with U.S. encouragement, on cheap Middle East oil, called into question the U.S. approach to the region. The U.S. military presence, now deployed in support of Israel, appeared to threaten the entire Middle East–Western “energy alliance.” Just as Egypt and other regional states took from the Yom Kippur War a new respect for U.S. military might and decisiveness, so too did the United States take from the oil embargo a new appreciation of the economic cost of conflict, especially Arab-Israeli conflict, wracking the region.<sup>20</sup>

In light of the opportunities presented by U.S. military action in 1973, as well as the underlying regional risks reflected by the Yom Kippur War and the embargo, the United States by decade’s end had

- ▣ shown that its weapons and its allies would prevail in any conventional regional conflict;
- ▣ “flipped” Egypt to a partner, supported by a multibillion-dollar security assistance effort continuing to this day;
- ▣ orchestrated the first ever permanent withdrawal of Israeli forces from Arab territory—which Arab arms had failed four times to do;
- ▣ secured Israel from conventional attack by the region’s nation-states, now for more than forty years; and
- ▣ brokered a historic 1979 peace between Israel and Egypt, opening

the way to a similar one with Jordan almost two decades later, a negotiating path with the Palestinians, and de facto acceptance of Israel by most moderate Arab states.<sup>21</sup>

In achieving these goals, the United States changed the dynamic of the region. The prestige of the United States from its weapons to its negotiating skills, and its commitment to Arab as well as Israeli political interests, dramatically strengthened trust in America by Saudi Arabia and other key Arab states as well as Israel.<sup>22,23</sup>

Militarily, the flipping of Egypt gave the United States its first rapid military route into the heart of the Gulf, by sea from the Mediterranean via priority transit of the Suez Canal, and through Egyptian airspace straight across the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia. Air movement apart from Israel had been constrained until then by airspace being in unfriendly hands from Iraq to Egypt—as had been the canal.<sup>24</sup>

## **New Threats, the Carter Doctrine, and American Regional Dominance**

The new U.S. regime encompassing security, diplomacy, and military deployment was barely in place when three crises shattered the region—the transformation of Iran into an Islamic extremist state, the Soviet march into Afghanistan, and the rise of violent Sunni Islamic movements. These developments, although initially having little to do with the United States, threatened the new U.S. regional strategy of direct security and diplomatic engagement, endangering the oil-exporting states and opening the door to direct Soviet military threat.

The first of these crises was Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. While in some respects a popular uprising against a military-ruled state despite the royal trappings, it was rooted<sup>25</sup> in a fundamentalist theological approach to Islam by Shiite clerics reflecting a radicalism increasingly seen also among Sunni thinkers. The transformation of critically important Iran from friend to foe was not only strategically important, it also signaled the rise of Islamic extremism region-wide—soon seen in the Mecca siege, the attack on the U.S. embassy in Islamabad, and some of the opposition to the Soviets in Afghanistan. It likewise presaged the eventual demise of other states following a secular, socialist, military autocratic model, including Iraq, Yemen, and Libya—and much of

Kemalist Turkey with the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdogan—with Egypt, Algeria, and Syria barely surviving. As David Crist points out in his extraordinary work, *The Twilight War*,<sup>26</sup> the first U.S. concern with the shah's fall involved the Soviets' exploiting this sudden hole in the U.S. defense perimeter between the USSR and warm-water ports, with radical Islam playing a lesser role in Washington's calculations. But concern in the United States about radical Islam soon grew.

The second blow to the U.S. order, the invasion of Afghanistan, was the first overt Soviet military invasion of a nonsatellite state since World War II, and thus had to be challenged.

President Carter reacted vigorously to these developments through diplomatic isolation of Iran; a military rescue mission to Tehran; diplomatic and soon military moves to challenge the Soviet invasion, including creation of a regional U.S. military command—the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF), which became U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in 1983;<sup>27</sup> and, most important, the announcement in January 1980 of the Carter Doctrine in response to the Soviet march into Afghanistan, which affirmed:

An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.<sup>28</sup>

The Carter Doctrine was the first and, until today, the most comprehensive and explicit statement of a U.S. security guarantee for the region. While the specific legal justifications and political motives varied for each of the score of U.S. military moves after 1980 from Pakistan to the Atlantic, all were in the spirit of Carter's forthright assertion of U.S. security interest in regional stability, primarily from outside forces in 1980 but eventually extending to threats coming from within the region itself.

Facing crises throughout the region, Carter, then Reagan, along with America's regional friends, soon closed ranks in an informal alliance that within twelve years would

- ▣ confront then defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan;
- ▣ stage Operation Praying Mantis in retaliation for Iran's threats to Gulf oil shipments;

- ▣ respond militarily to Iraq's annexation of Kuwait;
- ▣ push back terrorist threats from Palestinian groups and Libya—though less successfully terrorists supported by Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah; and
- ▣ further expand U.S. military and political primacy in the region, opening the door for dramatic diplomatic progress in the 1990s.

Apart from U.S. military skill, and diplomatic, basing, and funding support from regional partners, this tour de force rested on the strategic military “avenue of approach” created by Egypt’s flip to the U.S. camp, on trust among regional leaders, if not populations, in the United States as an effective broker between Israel and the Arabs, and on clever wielding of the “oil weapon” by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states in coordination with Washington.<sup>29</sup>

Not every U.S. move succeeded. The deployment of U.S. troops to Beirut in 1983, with a confused set of missions, was an abject failure. It, and the disastrous Iran-Contra scandal, demonstrated again to Iran vulnerabilities of its U.S. foe first seen during the embassy hostage crisis.

## **Building on Success**

By 1991, following its victories over the Soviet Union, Iran, and Iraq, the United States rested supreme in the region, as seemingly throughout the world. China and Russia appeared on a (slow) path to integration into the Western global economic and political community. Worldwide, the U.S. strategy was to consolidate its victories and accelerate what was seen as the End of History triumph of liberal democracy.<sup>30</sup> The Middle East was no exception. The United States sought under George H. W. Bush and then Bill Clinton to leverage America’s military and diplomatic success to lock in an era of regional peace and reconciliation, marked by the 1992 Madrid conference and the new impetus to Israeli-Arab peace, which culminated in the Oslo Accords and the treaty with Jordan, and containment of the remaining violent outliers: Saddam’s Iraq, the ayatollah’s Iran, Qadhafi’s Libya, and various terrorist groups. The strategy in the Clinton administration was named dual containment, focused on both Iran and Iraq.<sup>31</sup> While this containment was largely over-the-horizon, during this period the United States maintained bases in all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and intervened militarily, with mixed

success, in northern Iraq, southern Iraq, Somalia, and al-Qaeda sites to protect populations, contain dictators, and combat terrorism, .

But beneath the surface, the moorings of much of the region were slipping away, as young male populations without fulfilling jobs and reasonable futures swelled, and, especially, violent variants of political Islam grew, with much funding from the Gulf.<sup>32</sup> U.S. military dominance was opposed not by direct challenge but with asymmetrical counters, especially WMD and terrorism, by Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Islamic radicals. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of failed states and ungoverned territories appeared, in Afghanistan, Gaza, parts of Pakistan, Somalia, and Sudan. Many states within the region were losing legitimacy and loyalty in the eyes of their populations. Despite much progress, the United States, the Western community, and the region's Western-oriented states could not end the Israeli-Palestinian impasse, dry up the sources of terrorism, truly tame the handful of rogue states, or reform the economic and social malaise afflicting the entire region.<sup>33</sup> In short, despite U.S. and regional diplomatic and military success, underlying dysfunctions gained strength.

## Success Risked

The September 11 attacks not only changed the U.S. assessment of the threats in the Middle East, they also signaled the fundamental erosion of global values in the region and a slide into ever-expanding violence that increasingly characterizes much of the region today. The U.S. response to 9/11 initially was to rely on the traditional interstate system, including the UN Security Council and regional partners and allies, to complement the U.S. exercise of self-defense in going after those behind the attacks.

But, very quickly, the United States adopted a far more ambitious military-political-diplomatic strategy, designed not to manage the region's woes, as had been the goal for most of the preceding thirty years, but to end them. Overall, U.S. involvement was still based on the principles laid out in the 1970s and reinforced in the succeeding two decades: support U.S. allies and partners, with Israel in a special category, and block threats to stability, while ensuring the flow of hydrocarbons from the region to buttress the world economy. But in Afghanistan, and particularly Iraq, a new strategic doctrine arose based on much more

intense U.S. engagement, aimed at fundamental change in the region toward Western values. As President George W. Bush put it in his 2005 inaugural address, “The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.”

This engagement, justified by 9/11, focused not simply on regime change but on the far more ambitious task of societal transformation in a direction more compatible with the Western world and U.S. interests.<sup>34</sup> The rhetoric was backed by military force. Such transformation-from-a-tank inevitably lost both international diplomatic support and legal sanction. Unlike the first Gulf War, the United States was not only pushing for far more fundamental change but was doing so while far more isolated globally.

This effort did not succeed fully in either Iraq or Afghanistan, as seen by the Islamic State’s rapid gains in Iraq in 2014 and the decision to keep U.S. troops engaged in Afghanistan—who had been there since 2001—after 2016. And despite limited successes elsewhere—weaning Libya from its nuclear program, working with the international community on Iran’s nuclear threat, supporting Israel’s strike on the Syrian reactor—the Bush administration failed to effect the transformation it sought anywhere in the region.

President Obama, despite his rhetorical commitment to fundamental change in U.S. Middle East strategy in Cairo and elsewhere, followed a largely traditional approach to the region in his first term—strong support for an end to the Israeli-Palestinian impasse, initiation of the Afghan surge, intervention in Libya, and extension of the late Bush administration’s limited engagement in Iraq. He usually acted in a manner similar to President Clinton while eschewing Bush’s ambitious transformational experiment, and limited new commitments to facilitate the rebalancing to Asia. But in his second term, it became clear that he was attempting a transformation of the region and America’s role in it. While keeping much of the U.S. security architecture (see chapter 4 of this paper), Obama appeared ever less inclined to actually use military force to buttress it. Rather, as indicated in his 2009 Cairo and Ankara speeches and letters to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Obama sought throughout the region to win over enemies and convince the street population that America was not the enemy. The most notable example of this was his failure to

implement his goal of toppling Bashar al-Assad with anything stronger than an anemic Central Intelligence Agency arm-and-equip program. Similar half-measures characterized his hesitant reaction to IS's return to Iraq in the first half of 2014, his chemical weapons "redline" with the Assad regime, and his pledge, later rescinded, to withdraw the last U.S. troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2016. These policies, combined with continuing outreach to Iran culminating in a nuclear deal, amount to an Obama doctrine at odds with strategies going back to the early postwar period.

This strategy accepts lethal force as a primary tool only in the struggle against terrorist organizations, and then only through low-risk, low-cost aerial attacks and rare Special Operations raids. Otherwise, use of the military tool is considered counterproductive. The president was most explicit in this regard in his May 2014 West Point speech, arguing,

Since World War II, some of our most costly mistakes came not from our restraint, but from our willingness to rush into military adventures without thinking through the consequences—without building international support and legitimacy for our action; without leveling with the American people about the sacrifices required.<sup>35</sup>

When force is needed, his approach has been to rely on local champions—the Iraqi and Afghan government and armed forces, and regional and NATO allies and partners, as seen in the Libya operation—with the United States “leading from behind,” even though the administration itself has disavowed this language.

4.

## U.S. Military Engagement

SINCE THE END of World War II, U.S. military engagement in the Middle East has taken a number of forms, from equipment support to partners and allies to limited, later extensive basing of U.S. forces, all the way to military engagements ranging from brief raids to major ground campaigns.

### Security Architecture

In pursuit of the regional strategies discussed thus far, the United States has undertaken various long- and short-term political-military and military activities over the past seventy years, encompassing broadly five types:

1. Security guarantees and commitments
2. Security-assistance efforts: long-term Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and train, equip, and advise programs
3. Basing and deployments
4. Military operations or threats of military action
5. International diplomatic support for regional security and U.S. operations

This study is focused primarily on the fourth type: military operations or threat of military actions. These involve either the actual or the potential use of force, and thus are the riskiest but also the most potentially game-

changing elements of any security architecture. They build on types 1–3, are often but not always (e.g., Kuwait 1990) in support of type 1, and usually seek, as at least partial justification, type 5.

Operations in the Middle East were all designed to uphold the status quo by maintaining or restoring peace and deterrence, or to respond to threats to regional security and stability and to larger universal principles. The interventions break down as follows:

- ▣ **RESPONDING TO RUSSIAN POWER PROJECTION INTO THE AREA:** 1940s, Yom Kippur War Global Alert, 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, 2015 operations in Syria
- ▣ **DEFENDING ALLIES OR RESPONDING TO ASSAULTS ON THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM:** Yom Kippur War airlift, Iran’s rejection of a ceasefire with Iraq and counteroffensive into Iraq to depose Saddam, Tanker War, Iraqi invasion of Kuwait
- ▣ **RESPONDING TO TERRORIST ASSAULTS WITH OR WITHOUT STATE SUPPORT:** Iran (1980), capture of the Achille Lauro hijacking leader (1985), attack on Libya in response to the Berlin disco bombing (1986), global war on terror, Afghanistan (2001–), the Islamic State
- ▣ **RESPONDING TO WMD THREATS:** Iraq (1991–2003), Syria (2007, 2013), Iran (2003–15)
- ▣ **INTERVENING IN CIVIL CONFLICTS OR FAILED STATES:** Beirut (1957, 1983), Operation Northern Watch (1997–2003) in Iraq; Syrian intervention (2011–present)

The only partial exceptions to the “defensive in nature” categorization were the interventions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), where transformational goals helped spur the decisions to intervene. Apart from dealing with specific security challenges and conflicts, however, these operations taken as a whole undergird the entire security architecture by demonstrating the willingness to use force to underwrite the success of the regional security system.

Such demonstrations of commitment and resolve are particularly important in the Middle East for a variety of reasons:

- ▣ With the exception of Turkey—and this is the most important point—U.S. de facto allies and partners do not enjoy formal security treaty relationships with, and thus legally binding commitments from, the United States, in contrast to Europe with the NATO collective security alliance and to the Asia-Pacific region with a series of bilateral security treaties.
- ▣ Most underlying historical, ethnic, social, and civil conflicts that open the door to, or fuel, security threats are notably intractable.
- ▣ The United States in particular, and the Western model in general, is unpopular among most of the region's populations, due to anti-colonialist ideology, various roles Islam plays, and rejection of U.S. policies toward Israel.
- ▣ The security problem is complex, usually involving sets of outside and regional state actors as well as nonstate actors, ranging from forces in civil wars to insurgents and terrorists.

## **Security Guarantees and Commitments**

While commitments to defend U.S. partners are inherent in the general security pledges contained in administration declarations such as the Truman Doctrine, Carter Doctrine, and 2015 Camp David GCC Summit's final communiqué, in the absence of legally binding defense obligations other than to NATO partner Turkey, U.S. commitments to aid partners under military pressure are usually indirect. They are sometimes referred to in bilateral instruments to formalize basing or security assistance and are complemented by high-level visits, declarations of partnership, military exercises, and other on-the-ground manifestations of strong security relations and thus a "presumption to defend." Stationing forces in a given country is usually a major signal of willingness to defend, in part out of practicality, given the difficulty of extracting these forces were such a country to be attacked. Ultimately, the sense of a U.S. security guarantee is communicated by all of the above, and sealed by the general perception of U.S. willingness to use force in the region, a perception most effectively strengthened by the use of force itself.

## Security Assistance, Training, and Cooperation

The most ubiquitous U.S. military activity in the region has been security assistance—FMS programs and the various train, advise, and equip activities of U.S. missions, buttressed by intelligence sharing, joint exercises with various regional players such as Bright Star in Egypt, military education in the United States, and other efforts to develop so-called partner capacity. The goal is to ensure that such states can defend themselves without necessarily relying on massive U.S. troop reinforcement and, to the extent possible, can support U.S. operations. Longstanding programs include Morocco, Turkey, GCC states, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Pakistan; more recent ones include Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran was a major recipient of U.S. arms until 1979. Lebanon receives modest U.S. weapons and advisory support. U.S. weapons sales and, to a limited degree, advisory functions are complemented by those of NATO allies—primarily Britain and France, but Germany has also been active in providing weapons systems.

## Basing and Deployments

A variety of military basing activities characterize the U.S. presence, from bases with no permanent U.S. military occupants but of great importance for naval units—Jebel Ali in Dubai—to quasi-permanent U.S. deployments and bases. In essentially every case, including the longstanding U.S. presence at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey, such bases are commanded by the host country, and the U.S. presence—with the exception of Incirlik—is seen at least theoretically as temporary. What characterizes all these activities is their relative longevity, the military flexibility they allow in emergencies and for specific operations, and the signal of U.S. commitment they convey. But none allows totally free U.S. operations without some form of local permission, oversight, or coordination.

Following, then, is a summary of such basing and deployments since 1945. The division between deployments seen as temporary to deal with a specific security problem (covered in the next section, “Military Operations or Threats of Military Action”) and the following is the latter’s semipermanent nature and the absence of a link to any short-term security problem. Minor U.S. military presences, especially for security-assistance programs and intelligence gathering, are not listed:

- ▣ **SIXTH FLEET:** Deployed under various command titles since shortly after World War II until the present in the eastern Mediterranean<sup>36, 37</sup>
- ▣ **TURKEY:** Basing of U.S. forces for various missions, including nuclear, intelligence, and NATO command and control, from the early 1950s until the present. From 2011 to the present: AN/TPY-2 radar, under NATO command, oriented toward Iran<sup>38</sup>
- ▣ **MOROCCO:** U.S. basing primarily for strategic nuclear strike missions between 1950 and 1963<sup>39</sup>
- ▣ **LIBYA:** U.S. basing from 1948 until 1970 for nuclear and other aviation missions<sup>40</sup>
- ▣ **PAKISTAN:** U.S. basing from 1959 to 1970 for intelligence and support missions. Later, limited deployments for the global war on terror and Afghan insurgency
- ▣ **U.S. NAVAL FORCES GULF:** Established in the late 1940s as an ad hoc naval task force, until the present. Headquartered in Bahrain with a major anchorage in Dubai. Eventually reflagged as Fifth Fleet/Naval Forces Central Command<sup>41</sup>
- ▣ **OMAN:** U.S. Air Force and occasionally other forces stationed since 1981<sup>42</sup>
- ▣ **MFO:** 1982 to present, with a significant U.S. Army element<sup>43, 44</sup>
- ▣ **QATAR:** U.S. basing and deployments from the Gulf War until the present<sup>45, 46</sup>
- ▣ **SAUDI ARABIA:** U.S. basing and deployments from the Gulf War until 2003<sup>47</sup>
- ▣ **UNITED ARAB EMIRATES:** U.S. basing and deployments from the Gulf War until the present<sup>48</sup>
- ▣ **KUWAIT:** U.S. basing and deployments from the Gulf War until the present—including ground forces deployments in 1994, 1996, and 1997–1998 and starting in 2003 in response to Iraqi and other regional threats<sup>49, 50, 51</sup>

- ▣ **ISRAEL:** positioned ammunition and, from 2009 on, AN/TPY-2 radar and Aegis ballistic missile defense (BMD) warship oriented toward Iran<sup>52, 53</sup>
- ▣ **GULF:** U.S. Patriot batteries and, more recently, AN/TPY radar oriented toward Iran: 1990s to the present<sup>54</sup>

## Military Operations or Threats of Military Action

In pursuit of its global and regional strategy described in chapter 2, the United States has conducted far more military operations in the Middle East than anywhere else since 1945. What follows is an inventory of all

### OPERATIONS

As outlined here, military operations can be divided into major wars, other large-scale conflicts, major operations short of combat, and other operations and engagements.

#### MAJOR WARS

- Gulf War, 1990–91
- Afghanistan invasion, 2001
- Afghanistan counterinsurgency, 2001–present
- Iraq invasion, 2003
- Iraq counterinsurgency, 2003–11

#### OTHER LARGE-SCALE CONFLICTS

- Operation Earnest Will (reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers to protect them from Iranian aggression), 1987–88<sup>55</sup>
- Containment of Iraq post–Gulf War:
  - Operation Provide Comfort, 1991–2003<sup>56</sup>
  - Operation Northern Watch, 1991–2003<sup>57</sup>
  - Operation Southern Watch, 1991–2003<sup>58</sup>
  - Strike on Iraq in response to alleged Bush assassination plot, 1993<sup>59</sup>
  - Operation Desert Fox, 1998<sup>60</sup>
- GWOT, 2001–present
- Counter-IS campaign, 2014–present

## MAJOR NONCOMBAT OPERATIONS

- U.S. responses to contain Soviet encroachment in Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan and threats against Turkey, 1946–1950<sup>61</sup>
- Military equipment airlift to Israel, 1973
- Yom Kippur War global alert, October 1973
- U.S. military support for the Afghan mujahedin, 1980–1989
- Coercive nuclear diplomacy with, and containment of, Iran, 2003–present<sup>62, 63, 64</sup>

## OTHER OPERATIONS AND ENGAGEMENTS

- Lebanon, 1958<sup>65</sup>
- Attack on USS *Liberty*, 1967<sup>66</sup>
- Jordan crisis, 1970<sup>67</sup>
- Naval task force in support of Pakistan, 1971<sup>68</sup>
- Iran hostage rescue mission, 1980
- U.S. intelligence support to Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War<sup>69</sup>
- Beirut operation, 1983–1984
- U.S. airstrikes on Syrian air defenses in Lebanon, 1983
- TWA hijacking alert, 1985<sup>70</sup>
- *Achille Lauro* hijacking intercept, 1985<sup>71</sup>
- Libya bombing, 1986<sup>72</sup>
- Attack on USS *Stark*, 1987<sup>73</sup>
- Somali peacekeeping operation, 1992–1993
- Khobar Towers bombing, 1996<sup>74</sup>
- U.S. engagements with al-Qaeda, 1998–2001
- Anti-piracy operations, Horn of Africa, 2006–present<sup>75, 76</sup>
- Operational support to Turkey against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), 2007–present<sup>77</sup>
- Libya Operation, 2011<sup>78</sup>
- Syria overt and covert train-and-equip efforts, 2011–present<sup>79, 80</sup>
- Syria chemical weapons threat of military action, 2013<sup>81</sup>
- Patriot missiles, F-16s, and other forces deployed to Jordan, oriented toward Syria, 2013–present<sup>82</sup>
- U.S. Patriot unit as part of NATO deployment to Turkey oriented toward Syria, 2013–2015<sup>83</sup>
- U.S. air-to-air aircraft deployed to Turkey to counter Russian deployments to Syria, late 2015<sup>84</sup>

significant such military activities. Operations have involved actual or anticipated combat, military movements, and tactical actions, or threats to execute the preceding, in response to a specific situation. Some operations involved direct combat by U.S. forces, others did not.

This inventory is arbitrary in both its definitions and scale. Temporary deployments in support of one or another operation are not listed separate from the operation itself—e.g., aircraft deployed in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to conduct Operations Southern and Northern Watch. Moreover, several conflicts and operations, notably against al-Qaeda, involve military activities around the entire region, against both al-Qaeda and offshoot movements in Nigeria, Somalia, and Libya, and semipermanent basing in places such as Djibouti. For ease of inventory and logic, these will all be placed in one category—global war on terror (GWOT), with only the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts from 2001 and 2003 forward, the fight against IS, and the Clinton administration’s military actions against al-Qaeda singled out as separate operations.

Likewise, the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are separated from the counterinsurgency campaigns in which the United States, after overthrowing governments in those countries, became involved, given that the missions, types of operations, and, to a large degree, foes were different. Attacks on U.S. embassies and other diplomatic establishments are not included, although U.S. military personnel were usually present during most such attacks in the Middle East.

## **International Diplomatic Support for Regional Security and U.S. Operations**

An important component of the U.S. strategic architecture for maintaining security in the Middle East has been the effort to garner international support for the overall U.S. security agenda. This consists of two major activities: “subcontracting” security missions to international organs, typically the UN; and buttressing U.S. operations or positions through (1) international endorsement and “legalization,” usually through the UN but occasionally through NATO, and (2) building international military coalitions. With the first activity, the United States as a UN Security Council member has supported various UN observer missions, in

Lebanon, the Golan Heights, the Sinai Peninsula, and along the Kuwait-Iraq border, and several significant peacekeeping missions, including in Lebanon from 2006 on, Sudan, and Somalia. While the United States usually does not participate in these missions beyond sending observers, it has made exceptions, such as in Somalia and the Sinai MFO, although the latter is not a UN mission.

The United States has sought and obtained specific mandates for military action in some cases (Libya 2011, Afghanistan 2001, Gulf War 1991); in others, it has relied on UN Security Council resolutions more generally, describing an overall situation as, to one or another degree, a threat to peace and acting in the spirit of the UN findings. Examples of this include the tanker-reflagging operations in the Gulf (1987–88), the Beirut deployment (1983–84), anti-al-Qaeda and anti-IS operations, and to some degree the 2003 invasion of Iraq, based on the 2002 UN Security Council Resolution 1441.

For its part, NATO has played a major role in the Afghanistan counterinsurgency campaign and the 2011 Libya operation, and a minor role in the anti-piracy operations and Iraq military training. NATO has also deployed forces to Turkey three times since 1991 to respond to situations in Iraq or Syria. The United States put together major international coalitions for the first Gulf War, the GWOT, the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions and the counterinsurgency campaigns in both, anti-piracy operations, the 2011 Libya campaign, and the anti-IS effort. The United States turned to a handful of allies for the 1983 Beirut deployment (Britain, France, and Italy) and containment of Iraq (with Britain and, until 1996, France involved in no-fly-zone enforcement, and Australia and New Zealand deploying special forces contingents for the 1998 confrontation with Saddam).

Apart from the military efficacy of additional forces that coalitions provide, “internationalizing” conflicts to either allow others to deal with them or to justify or reinforce a U.S. effort reflects strategic realities. In many cases, the United States seeks an “economy of force” posture or, if seen as biased to one side, is happy to turn over operations to other entities. When America itself is involved, the usually negative perceptions of the United States by local populations and the reluctance of the American people to become mired in interminable Middle East conflicts argue for maximum international legal justification for

any U.S. action, and as many coalition partners as possible, to avoid a “made in the U.S.” impression. There are costs to such internationalization. Turning security efforts over to the UN can lead to spotty success (Lebanon post-2006) or failure (pullout of the UN mission from the Sinai before the 1967 Six Day War). Accepting an international mandate can also limit U.S. war goals—as was seen in the UN mandate for the first Gulf War.

## Successes and Failures

A review of the just-discussed U.S. operations over the past seventy years indicates general success, although some types of operations had a higher failure rate. Of course, there is a certain amount of subjective judgment in the terms “success,” “mixed,” and “failure.” *Success* here signifies that (1) the actual military operation yielded a military success, with the mission accomplished without excessive casualties, cost, or major diplomatic or political fallout, and (2) the operation on balance contributed, even if modestly, to larger geostrategic goals. *Mixed* means that the operations themselves were militarily less than fully successful, not needed, or did not fulfill political goals, or too early to judge. Opera-

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### OPERATIONS INVOLVING COMBAT

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#### Success

- Gulf War, 1990–91
- Reflagging operations against Iranian attacks on neutral shipping
- Containment of Saddam, which includes:
  - Operation Provide Comfort, 1991–2003
  - Operation Northern Watch, 1991–2003
  - Operation Southern Watch, 1991–2003
  - Operation Desert Fox, 1998
- Invasion of Afghanistan, 2001
- Invasion of Iraq, 2003
- Antipiracy operations, Horn of Africa, 2006–present

#### Mixed

- *Achille Lauro* hijacking intercept, 1985
- Libya bombing 1986

- GWOT, 2001–present
- Afghanistan counterinsurgency, 2001–present
- Iraq counterinsurgency, 2003–11
- Libya operation, 2011
- Counter-IS campaign, 2014–present

### **Failure**

- Iran hostage rescue mission, 1980
- Beirut, 1983–84
- Somalia 1992–93
- Khobar Towers bombing, 1996
- U.S. engagements with al-Qaeda, 1998–2001

## **OPERATIONS SHORT OF COMBAT**

### **Success**

- U.S. deployments and actions to contain Soviet encroachment in Turkey and Iran, 1946–48
- Lebanon deployment, 1958
- Jordan deployment, 1970
- Military equipment airlift to Israel, 1973
- Yom Kippur War global alert, October 1973
- Afghanistan train-and-equip mission, 1980–89
- U.S. support for Iraq against Iran, 1982–89
- Operational support against PKK, 2007–present
- Military pressure on Iran, 2003–15

### **Mixed**

- Syria chemical weapons redline threat, 2013
- Patriot missiles, F-16s, and other forces deployed to Jordan, oriented toward Syria, 2013–present
- U.S. Patriot unit as part of NATO deployment to Turkey, oriented toward Syria, 2013–15
- Deployment of F-15 air-superiority fighters to Incirlik Air Base in Turkey

### **Failure**

- None

tions listed as *failures* did not achieve even military success.<sup>85</sup> Of the five failures listed above, three involved withdrawal of the U.S. forces committed without achieving their military goal and after tactical failures. In the two other cases (the Khobar Towers bombing and al-Qaeda before 2001), the United States failed to take significant military or other action in response to terrorist attacks on U.S. military and other targets.

## Political Aspects

Aside from tactical military success or failure, and impact on political goals, military operations, deployments, and policies are subject to another measurement, particularly in a democracy—acceptability to the public and Congress. From that standpoint, various military activities did not fare well. There was little public reaction to Eisenhower and Nixon's military moves in the region. However, President Carter's response to the Iran hostage crisis and the failed rescue mission arguably cost him the presidency in 1980.<sup>86</sup> The Lebanon deployment became even more unpopular after the embassy and Marine barracks bombings.<sup>87</sup> The Iran-Contra scandal, a late spin-off of the Beirut operation, generated the biggest congressional and public crisis in the entire Reagan administration.

Beyond Beirut, operations in the 1980s generated no significant domestic opposition, directed as they were against terrorists, blatant Soviet aggression, or expansionist efforts in Iraq and the Gulf by Iran—still immensely unpopular in the United States because of the hostage crisis. The decision to go to war in January 1991 to throw Saddam's forces out of Kuwait led to a major national debate. The Bush administration had to narrowly and clearly define its objectives and seek first a UN Security Council mandate before it could squeak out a Senate majority supporting military action, all due to lingering "Vietnam syndrome" concerns.<sup>88</sup> President Clinton lost much public support over the loss of eighteen personnel in Mogadishu in September 1993. This experience affected his willingness to use force in the Balkans,<sup>89</sup> but he continued and expanded military containment and anti-WMD operations against Saddam, through Operation Desert Fox in 1998, with little public concern.

Following 9/11, the public outcry regarding U.S. failures was of course dramatic, but it did not direct blame toward either President George W. Bush or President Clinton but rather was channeled toward an aggressive U.S. response. Based on congressional votes in 2001 on the war

on terror<sup>90</sup> and in fall 2003 on Iraq,<sup>91</sup> public support for robust actions against direct and indirect sources of terrorist threat was deep. However, as Pew Research Center surveys demonstrate,<sup>92</sup> support for Iraq operations flagged quickly; support for the Afghanistan mission, given the different motivation for the U.S. intervention, and lower casualties, dropped more slowly but eventually fell below 50 percent.<sup>93</sup> The American people's deep disillusion toward these campaigns by 2012 was manifest in historically low percentages willing to see their country playing an active global role, according to polls by both Pew and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.<sup>94</sup> This disillusion was evident in the extremely strong public reaction to the president's request for congressional permission to use force against Syria in 2013 over its use of chemical weapons.<sup>95</sup> But in 2014, public reaction to the Islamic State moved in the other direction, with increasingly strong majorities favoring one or another form of U.S. military action.<sup>96</sup>

## Analysis of Military Operations

Over the past seventy years, most U.S. indirect military efforts have been more or less successful, breaking down as follows:

- ▣ **THREATS AND DIPLOMATIC ACTION:** Truman Doctrine, Global Alert (1973), Iran nuclear warnings, Syrian chemical weapons
- ▣ **DEPLOYMENTS WITHOUT COMBAT:** Beirut (1958), Jordan (1970), airlift to Israel (1973), MFO, Operation Provide Comfort
- ▣ **SUPPORT FOR PROXIES:** Truman Doctrine, CENTO, Carter Doctrine, Afghanistan campaign against the Soviet Union, support for Iraq against Iran, elements of the Afghanistan invasion (2001), elements of the Iraqi counterinsurgency (Sunni Awakening, 2007–08, and Iraqi army Basra campaign, 2008), and Afghanistan (post-2012)

Only three such cases have not succeeded: the train-and-equip effort in Iraq after 2011, the campaign against IS, for which results remain mixed, and the train-and-equip efforts with Syrian insurgents.

Limited air, naval, and Special Forces strikes against both conventional and unconventional forces have been generally successful or, at worst, mixed—namely, for the *Achille Lauro* seizure, Libya (1986, 2011), the Tanker War, Operation Desert Fox, and counterpiracy off Somalia.

But there are several exceptions, including the Tehran embassy rescue operation, the 1983 strike against Syrian air defenses, and pre-2001 efforts against al-Qaeda.

Ground operations have been consistently successful, with the United States holding the ground after offensives with low casualties in the Gulf War, Afghanistan invasion, and Iraq invasion. Each victory, however, generated a long-term military effort lasting a decade or more against asymmetrical forces—Saddam’s threats to his own population and his WMD programs after 1991, and insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. These long-term efforts did not produce victories and eventually generated dramatic alternatives (2003 invasion of Iraq, executed or attempted withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Iraq and Afghanistan), and, in the case of the two insurgencies, spurred considerable U.S. public opposition.

Against unconventional forces, ground operations have consistently been failures or only partial successes, with Somalia and Beirut in the first category and the Afghanistan and Iraq counterinsurgencies in the second. This has owed in part to difficulties coordinating multiple actions, ranging from direct military operations against insurgents to nation building, governance amelioration, economic development, and sectarian reconciliation categorized as counterinsurgency (COIN) in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Somalia.

Failure to one or another degree has also marked U.S. diplomatic as well as military responses to terrorist attacks and threats (namely, the Tehran hostage crisis, Lebanon bombings and kidnappings, Khobar Towers bombing, and pre-2001 al-Qaeda attacks), with the post-9/11 GWOT the most successful but still mixed. As noted already, the anti-IS campaign also earns a mixed score, although it is too soon to judge this outcome.

One preliminary conclusion from these analyses is that the more combat-focused a military activity is, the higher the chances are for failure. This is correct, but to then conclude that the “best” U.S. security policy would thus rely on other aspects of military architecture—from basing to train-and-equip—rather than actual engagement in combat would be false. This is because (1) despite this finding, most actual combat missions, as just outlined, have been successful, from large to small, from airstrikes to major ground engagements, apart from COIN and counterterrorism operations, with their inherent mixed-civilian, asymmetrical military natures; (2) as noted at the beginning of this

chapter, combat operations, even if risky, constitute the indispensable demonstrations of commitment and resolve that underpin the entire security architecture. A perceived unwillingness, or actual failure, to commit to combat undercuts the entire system—but so do too many failures once engaged in combat.

## **Strategic Successes**

Since World War II, the United States, using a mix of regional strategies and commitments, military force, and other elements of military architecture, such as diplomatic activity, internal political engagement or interference, economic assistance, and energy policy, has secured its bottom-line goals in the region, as laid out by President Obama:

- ▣ **THE FLOW OF HYDROCARBONS** from the region, almost 40 percent of internationally traded crude oil in recent decades, has continued without any major sustained cuts, furthering a huge growth in global prosperity.
- ▣ **NUCLEAR WEAPONS** were obtained by only two regional states, Pakistan and, everyone assumes, Israel, with little negative effect on regional stability.
- ▣ **CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS** programs were terminated, and the Iranian nuclear program is, for the present, constrained by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. U.S. knowledge of and support for the 2007 Israeli strike at the Syrian al-Kibar nuclear site<sup>97</sup> helped promote Israeli success and the end of Syria's nuclear program. In 2013, the U.S. threat to bomb Syria over use of chemical weapons compelled the Syrian government to negotiate the elimination of most of its CW stocks, but to the considerable detriment of regional trust in the U.S. willingness to use military force. Saddam's extensive WMD programs were contained by military action and international sanctions and diplomatic action over an almost twenty-year period. Finally, Libya surrendered all its nuclear programs after 2003.
- ▣ **TERRORISM** as a global and even regional threat had been largely extirpated by 2011, but made a comeback between IS and outlying al-Qaeda elements following the Arab Spring regional turbulence.

The United States and regional partners, often supported by the international community, have shielded the region from repeated efforts, first by the Soviet Union and then by one or another regional force, to dominate the Middle East. Successful major campaigns have included the initial efforts under the Truman Doctrine to shore up the region, the rescue of Israel and deterrence of the Soviet Union in the Yom Kippur War, the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, support to Iraq to fend off the Iranian counteroffensive into southern Iraq in 1982–89, the direct defeat of Iran in the tanker-reflagging operation, the liberation of Kuwait, the containment of Saddam, the overthrow of hostile regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, the degradation of al-Qaeda’s ability to launch strategic attacks, and the containment of IS.

The United States and its partners have thus consistently provided a security guarantee for the region’s overall stability and the future of its heavily stressed nation-state system. Today, the United States can count most of the region’s states as allies (Turkey), special partners (Israel), or partners (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, the six Gulf states, Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco). These states all are significant recipients of U.S. military equipment, in some cases economic or military financial aid, de jure or de facto U.S. security guarantees, and joint planning or training with U.S. military staffs, with U.S. troops or bases in twelve states and “access” available in Saudi Arabia. Two other states, Algeria and Lebanon, coordinate to one or another degree with the United States on various security issues. A band of African states south of the Arab Mediterranean states receives either direct or indirect U.S. military support, usually via the French or other African nations. Only two states in the region are hostile, Syria and Iran, while three other states have descended into chaos as ungoverned regions—Somalia, Yemen, and Libya, along with parts of Lebanon, Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq now under control of one or another subnational terrorist organization.

## Strategic Failures

At the highest strategic level, U.S. engagement since 1945 has failed in “winning” the region effectively as an ever more peaceful, prosperous, and politically liberal element in an integrated Wilsonian global system, the core goal of U.S. foreign policy. This contrasts with the U.S. experience elsewhere over the past seventy years, from Western Europe to East Asia,

eventually Southeast Asia (despite Vietnam), the Central American and Caribbean basin, Eastern Europe, and the Balkans. The region's underlying resistance to outside influence became manifest when, after the most successful decade-plus of U.S. engagement there (1987–2001), with repeated defeat of aggression and reconciliation on the Arab-Israeli front, the region and much of the globe were hit by scores of attacks by the al-Qaeda terrorist network. Almost simultaneously, the UN Development Programme published in 2002 a devastating study on the social, intellectual, and cultural state of the Arab world, concluding, *inter alia*:

There is a substantial lag between Arab countries and other regions in terms of participatory governance. As a consequence, more than half of Arab women are still illiterate. The region's maternal mortality rate is double that of Latin America and the Caribbean, and four times that of East Asia. The Arab region has the lowest level of access to ICT (Information and Communications Technology) of all regions of the world, even lower than sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>98</sup>

The ultimate rationale for U.S. foreign policy in the last century has been to combat these underlying human catastrophes for moral reasons and because such catastrophes breed violence and chaos. The United States has been successful within the region fending off classic aggression for decades, but has been far less successful dealing with the violence and instability generated within states by their own populations, often fueled by the phenomena documented in the 2002 report, and by extremist religious views.

Furthermore, despite mixed success against both al-Qaeda and IS, and huge effort by the United States, regional states, and the rest of the international system to work against violent extremist ideologies, popular sentiment in favor of Sunni extremist groups remains worrisome throughout the region, although only a small minority supports IS.<sup>99</sup>

This ultimately political, social, and ideological failure at the strategic level is mirrored at the tactical level by repeated failures in nation building and reconciliation in the region, whether part of COIN or separately. The United States has been unable to capitalize on military victories in cases involving regime change to produce stable states and societies that themselves do not add to regional chaos: Afghanistan post-1989 and again post-2001; Iraq post-2003; and Libya post-2011. The one exception

is the Kurdistan region of Iraq post-1991. Further examples of this pattern of failure beyond the military include development efforts in Gaza, Egypt, and Pakistan, and peacemaking in the Arab-Israeli conflict—despite a series of tactical diplomatic victories—the Kashmir dispute, Bahrain (2011), and Yemen (2015).

To be sure, U.S. COIN and nation-building efforts have had at least limited success, and tools exist to pursue new such efforts. But given these efforts' high cost, and the limited patience of the American people for them, they can be pursued only as a so-called boutique strategy, with prerequisites such as limited U.S. ground forces commitment, presidential will, and a high level of commitment by the American people and political system to success.

This discouraging experience has been mirrored by those of colonial powers post-World War II, as well as Israel in the West Bank, Gaza, and Lebanon, the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and regional states in internal or external conflicts (Pakistan in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas [FATA], Egypt in Yemen), thus suggesting that the problem is not some flaw in the U.S. formula for development and reconciliation but rather in the “patient” whom numerous “doctors” have been trying to heal. Thus, tweaks to nation-building doctrine, or increases in levels of effort, are unlikely to produce more successful results absent a societal revolution from within.

The limited success of U.S. COIN campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, with more than 6,500 military personnel killed and several trillion dollars of expense,<sup>100, 101</sup> generated strong, sustained opposition within the American people to military action in the region for the first time since 1945. This was made clear in the election of an “anti-Iraq” Democratic Party-dominated Congress in 2006, the success of Barack Obama in 2008, running on an antiwar platform, and the dramatic public reaction when Obama put the Syrian redline bombing question to the U.S. Congress in 2013. Furthermore, Pew and Chicago Council on Global Affairs surveys in 2012, as noted earlier, recorded the lowest-ever levels of American popular willingness to support a strong U.S. international role since the two firms began their foreign policy surveys.<sup>102</sup>

5.

## Conclusion

THE FOREGOING ANALYSIS characterizes the U.S. effort in the Middle East region from World War II until the present. But in the past three-plus years, several developments have challenged the foregoing assumptions. First, the Obama administration's relative lack of commitment to the region, apart from negotiating the nuclear agreement with Iran—itsself with problematic effects on regional security—along with negative attitudes among the American people, raises questions about whether the United States will continue the laborious task of maintaining regional security and deterring the threats to it. Furthermore, just as these threats are growing, the collapse of the Arab Spring movement in almost every country has led to disintegrating stability throughout the region, as seen in Libya, Iraq, the Sinai, and, above all, Syria, as well as the rise of a unique al-Qaeda offspring, the Islamic State, with its quasi-conventional military capabilities and “semistate” profile. In the latest twist to the region's destabilization, Russia intervened in the Syrian conflict with a significant conventional military capability, beginning in September 2015 and soon followed by a military confrontation with Turkey.

These developments, generated at least in part by the administration's disengagement, can themselves provoke one of two outcomes: further U.S.—and thus other Western—withdrawal, leading not to a continuation of the decades-long “stalemate” of modernity and stability versus radicalism and chaos but rather to a downward spiral empowering that radicalism and chaos ever more; or growing dominance of a Russia-Iran-Syria axis in the region as an alternative security regime to a fading U.S.-

led Western system. Job one for the next U.S. administration will likely be to curb the possibilities of both such a downward spiral and dominance by a Russian- and Iranian-led regional alliance.

Even if the United States succeeds in this regard, the baseline conclusion will remain that, in the Middle East, U.S. engagement, sadly oriented first on military force, can only limit the impact of the region's underlying violence and instability. In contrast to other regions, the relative calm and opportunities for global integration that a U.S. security umbrella provides have not significantly furthered Middle East integration into the global community or helped calm the region's demons. Thus, even at its most successful, U.S. security avoids the worst and buys time. Avoiding the worst and buying time, however, does secure the immediate goals the president laid out in 2013 to support partners, secure oil flows, combat terrorism, and hinder WMD development. Whether such an approach eventually will produce stability; whether the region despite U.S. efforts will spin out of control or again be the stage for major-power confrontations; and even whether the American people will give up on the Middle East: these remain open questions. But while such questions are debated, the United States will still be called upon to use military force, and it thus has an interest in using it effectively without becoming bogged down in quagmires.

## PART I.

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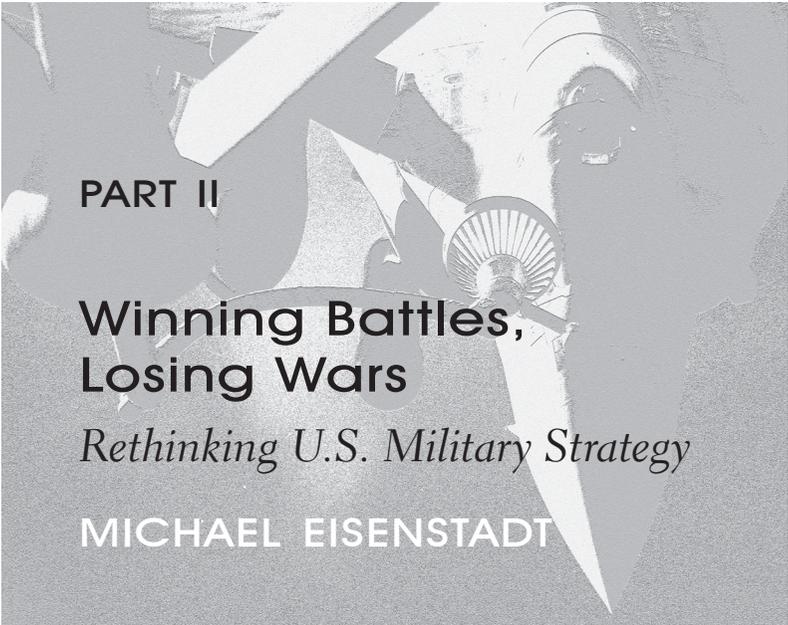
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**PART II**

**Winning Battles,  
Losing Wars**

*Rethinking U.S. Military Strategy*

**MICHAEL EISENSTADT**



6.

## Introduction to Part II

AMERICA'S MILITARY interventions in the greater Middle East over the past two decades have often failed to effectively counter threats to U.S. interests emanating from the region or to advance American interests there. In fact, U.S. policies have frequently reinforced the region's pathologies and exacerbated some of its most intractable conflicts:

- ▣ The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to the creation of a weak state racked by sectarian violence, and contributed to the expansion of Iranian influence, the polarization of the region between Sunnis and Shiites, and eventually the rise of IS.
- ▣ The sacrifice of more than 6,850 U.S. service members and the expenditure of more than \$1.6 trillion dollars has failed to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan, or led to sustainable outcomes in either state.<sup>1</sup>
- ▣ U.S. efforts to promote democracy in the region contributed to the creation, in 2006, of a Hamas mini-state in Gaza that has provoked three wars against Israel.<sup>2</sup>
- ▣ U.S. inaction in Syria contributed to the unprecedented jihadist mobilization against President Bashar al-Assad, Iranian and Russian intervention, and a humanitarian disaster that is destabilizing the region and Europe.
- ▣ U.S. military support for NATO was key to the overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011, but lack of political

follow-through led to the emergence of a failed state on the shores of the Mediterranean.

- ▣ The nuclear deal with Iran has exacerbated allies' fears of a tacit U.S.-Iran alliance that may enable a more assertive Iranian regional policy, formalize the latter's status as a nuclear threshold state, and consolidate its position as the region's dominant power.

Many of these missteps were the result of failures to understand the politics of the Middle East, and to craft effective strategies due to flawed policy assumptions or ideological preconceptions.<sup>3</sup> Dysfunctional policy processes and the uneven performance by the United States of critical national security tasks such as deterrence and assurance, Security Force Assistance, and information activities also played a role. Finally, the complexity of the Middle Eastern operational environment poses formidable challenges for even the most experienced policymaker. The net result has been a geopolitical disaster whose consequences the U.S. has proven ill equipped to deal with, and which has raised questions about American competence.<sup>4</sup>

These failures should prompt a reassessment of how the U.S. thinks, organizes, and acts militarily in the region, especially since U.S. interests dictate that it remains engaged in the region diplomatically and militarily for the foreseeable future. Middle Eastern oil is still essential to the world economy, and what happens in the Middle East increasingly affects the rest of the world. The growing appeal of jihadist ideology (in both Sunni and Shiite varieties), the region's sectarian conflicts, the epidemic of failing and failed states—which have enabled violent extremist groups to strike roots and produced mass refugee flows, and Iran's slow-motion nuclear breakout, all have potential global impacts.

Whereas the West has long worked to extend its security frameworks to the Middle East (starting with the Baghdad Pact in the 1950s), today it is the Middle East's insecurity that is spreading to the West. And whereas in the past, Europe's wars (World War I and II) were fought on a global stage, today it is the Middle East's wars that are spreading beyond the region, to Europe, the United States, and elsewhere.

The conflicts now roiling the Middle East will be the principal driver of global instability in the coming decades. And while Middle Eastern terrorism may not pose an existential threat to the United States, the

fear it engenders has the potential to move politics in the United States and Europe in illiberal directions, threatening American democracy and the Atlantic alliance, and strengthening Russia's influence in Europe. For these reasons, rectifying the aforementioned shortcomings in U.S. strategy and policy will not only be critical to fashioning effective U.S. responses to the security challenges emanating from the region, and the political challenges they may engender, but doing so will be a vital American interest.

This study does not offer a new U.S. strategy for the Middle East or examine the tension between values and interests in U.S. policy; such topics are beyond the scope of this piece. It is, however, a work *about* strategy, that examines the reasons for the unsatisfactory outcomes of many of America's military interventions in the region—particularly since 9/11; how the operational environment should shape U.S. military strategy toward the Middle East; and how the United States can more effectively employ the military instrument to advance its interests and achieve its policy objectives there (though there are also challenges for which it has no solutions or answers at present).

Chapter 7 discusses the salient features of the Middle Eastern operational environment that makes military intervention in the region so challenging. Chapter 8 examines the implications of the repeated failure to align ways, means, and ends in U.S. Middle East strategy, and to effectively manage necessary policy tradeoffs.

The next three chapters evaluate America's performance of a number of select national security tasks that are critical to the success of its Middle East policy. Chapter 9 assesses U.S. counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and in particular, the use of drones. Chapter 10 examines America's track record when it comes to deterring and compelling adversaries, and assuring partners and allies. Chapter 11 examines U.S. train and equip and Security Force Assistance missions, and chapter 12 examines the role of information activities in U.S. policy.

Finally, chapter 13 recommends ways to more effectively employ the military to achieve U.S. policy objectives in the Middle East. Specifically, it proposes new "ways of war" that are tailored to the region's operational environment, steps to enhance America's strategic competence, and measures for improving American performance of the aforementioned national security tasks, that are critical to achieving its policy objectives and securing its interests in the region.

7.

## American Sisyphus: Impact of the Middle Eastern Operational Environment

WHEN THE U.S. MILITARY has squared off in the Middle East against conventional armies to achieve well-defined military objectives, as when it expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991, it has fared well—although major conventional wars have been the exception, rather than the rule, in the region since then. When it has used the military instrument to deter or compel adversaries, fight insurgencies, engage in state/nation building or achieve broad political objectives, it has often come up short, due in large part to challenges navigating the region’s cultural and political landscape,<sup>5</sup> and understanding the Middle Eastern operational environment.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most salient feature of the region’s operational environment involves the way in which culture and politics tend to prolong conflicts and thwart their resolution.<sup>7</sup> Several factors may play a role:

- ▣ The influence of tribal values embedded in Arab political culture—emphasizing in-group solidarity, flexible alliances (“me against my brother, me and my brother against our cousin, all of us against the world”), and the importance of avenging affronts to individual and group honor;
- ▣ Strong primordial and national identities forged in struggles against local enemies, colonial powers, and foreign invaders;
- ▣ A religion—Islam—that elevates defense of the *umma* (community of believers) and of Muslim lands to a religious obligation;
- ▣ A zero-sum approach to politics that complicates efforts to resolve conflicts and often ensures their perpetuation. While enemies may

sometimes agree or be coerced to cooperate in extremis, they will often revert to form when circumstances change;

- ▣ The role of violence and conflict in forging and asserting individual and group identity (“I fight, therefore I am”);<sup>8</sup>
- ▣ The participation of oil-rich states and foreign fighters on both sides of the sectarian divide, which prolongs regional conflicts that might otherwise have burned out if only local funds and manpower were involved.

The increasingly prominent role of religion in the region’s conflicts is particularly noteworthy. Since World War II, the number of religious conflicts worldwide has been growing, with Islam playing a disproportionate role compared to other religions.<sup>9</sup> Islam has figured centrally in Middle Eastern conflicts in recent decades,<sup>10</sup> with its role increasing progressively after each of a series of events: Iran’s Islamic Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979; the events of 9/11; the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; and the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011.<sup>11</sup> Most of these conflicts have pitted Muslims against Muslims—typically Sunnis versus Sunnis or Sunnis versus Shiites.<sup>12</sup>

Religious conflicts, whether within or between faith communities, are generally longer, more violent, and more difficult to resolve than other conflicts<sup>13</sup>—although quantitative studies show that conflicts involving Muslims are neither more violent nor longer-lasting than conflicts involving other religions.<sup>14</sup> While culture and religion undoubtedly help explain regional conflict dynamics, structural factors—particularly the features of the regional state system—undoubtedly play an important role too.<sup>15</sup>

The Middle East is, as Henry Kissinger has called it, a “pre-Westphalian” state system—in which states do not accept the exclusive sovereignty of other states over their own territory, and incessantly meddle in their domestic affairs.<sup>16</sup> Thus, for decades, the region’s dominant Arab-Islamic identity has legitimized intervention by regional states and nonstate actors in the affairs of other regional actors on nationalist or religious grounds.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, because of the region’s resource endowments and its location at the crossroads of several continents, the Great Powers have historically penetrated and been involved in the region’s affairs. Both regional and external powers have repeatedly conspired to

tip domestic and regional balances in favor of allies and clients, preventing adversaries from consolidating victories, precluding the emergence of a regional hegemon, and prolonging conflicts.

Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, these tendencies were exacerbated by the proliferation of weak and failing states, allowing terrorist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda to establish themselves in ungoverned spaces, and ambitious Arab states like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, and non-Arab states like Turkey, Iran, and Russia, to intervene in conflicts throughout the region. Conflicts have become more complex and interconnected, leading to the emergence of a regional “conflict system” spanning sub-Saharan Africa to South Asia, in which arms, foreign fighters, tactics and techniques, and combatants migrate from one conflict to another, often energizing and intensifying these brushfire wars, and creating the potential for regional conflicts.

These features of the Middle East operational environment have tended to reinforce those characteristics intrinsic to war that make victory elusive under the best of circumstances: fog, friction, uncertainty, complexity, contingency, and the frequent refusal of the vanquished to accept defeat.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in the Middle East:

- ▣ New realities created by wars have often been swept away within a few years by the very social and political forces they unleashed.
- ▣ Wars have often yielded unintended consequences as vexing as the threats they averted.
- ▣ Wars have rarely resolved fundamental conflicts, more often heralding a new round of fighting; indeed, the fruits of even great victories have often proven ephemeral.

A brief review of the historical record is instructive in this regard.

The 1967 Arab-Israeli war produced a decisive Israeli victory whose military consequences were soon challenged. Unwilling to accept occupation and defeat, and rearmed by their Soviet patrons, the Arab states initiated two attempts to overturn the postwar status quo: the 1968–1970 Egypt-Israel War of Attrition and the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. The 1967 war also spurred the rise of Palestinian nationalism as a force in the region, opening a new phase in the Arab-Israeli conflict and paving the way for civil wars in Jordan (1970–1971) and Lebanon (1975–

1990). Nearly fifty years on, the region is still dealing with the 1967 war's repercussions.

Although the 1973 war ended in a draw, due largely to U.S. diplomatic intervention, it appeared to portend a fundamental shift in the Arab-Israeli balance of power, with the restoration of Arab pride and confidence, the emergence of the "oil weapon," the quadrupling of oil prices, and the use of the resulting windfall to underwrite huge arms purchases. This apparent shift, however, did not last long. The war led, on the one hand, to a separate peace between Egypt and Israel (1979)—a transformational event in the history of the region. On the other, it produced a petrodollar-fueled Iraqi military buildup that made possible Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980 and the enormously bloody and costly eight-year war that followed.

The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon yielded important short-term gains for Israel, including the expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organization's leadership to Tunis. It also spawned, however, Lebanese Hezbollah, which waged a protracted guerrilla war that succeeded, in May 2000, in ousting Israel from Lebanon. Hezbollah's success in Lebanon inspired the Palestinian Hamas to attempt the same in Gaza, eventually leading to Israel's withdrawal from the territory in 2005. These successes convinced Hezbollah and Hamas that in "resistance," they had discovered a formula for defeating Israel, contributing to additional destructive wars in Lebanon in 2006, and in Gaza in 2008–2009, 2012, and 2014.

In the Persian Gulf, the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) ended in a draw, but with Iraq claiming victory. A war-weary Iran was forced to abandon its dreams of regime change in Baghdad and the export of the Islamic Revolution throughout the region. For Iraq, the war's end led to an economic crisis, brought on by the demobilization of hundreds of thousands of conscripts who could not be absorbed into the civilian economy and the accumulation of \$85 billion in war debts. By invading Kuwait in 1990, Iraq attempted to address the disastrous legacy of one war by embarking on another, placing itself on a collision course with the United States.

The 1991 liberation of Kuwait by a U.S.-led coalition marked the high point in U.S. fortunes in the Middle East, and provided renewed impetus to Arab-Israeli diplomacy, producing the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accords in 1993, and an Israel-Jordan peace treaty in 1994. Yet within a

few short years, sanctions on Iraq and continued U.S. support for Israel would engender a powerful anti-American backlash. The U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia would likewise generate tensions between Washington and Riyadh, and lead to the rise of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, which targeted the United States due to its “occupation” of “the land of the two holy places,” leading to the September 11 attacks.

Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–2011) ended the threat Saddam Hussein posed to U.S. interests and to the region and created for the Iraqi people the possibility of a free and democratic future. But the war’s botched aftermath brought about unintended consequences, including a simmering Sunni insurgency—giving rise to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and subsequently to IS—the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq, and the region’s polarization along sectarian lines.

The Arab uprisings in 2011 prompted the fall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, the Mubarak regime in Egypt, the Qadhafi regime in Libya, and an epidemic of civil wars and state failures in Libya, the Sinai Peninsula, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq that has drawn in regional and external actors—a U.S.-led coalition in Iraq and Syria, and Iran, its allies, and Russia in Syria—and created opportunities for IS and al-Qaeda to expand their regional activities.

The enduring weakness of the Arab state system, the momentum behind the violence, and low oil prices practically ensure that the region’s conflicts will continue for some time, and may yet spread to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and the Gulf. For status quo-oriented states like the United States, much of the region no longer has a status quo to maintain.<sup>19</sup> Thus, worse may be yet to come from a region that seems to breed “black swans.”<sup>20</sup>

## Assessment

This assessment of the operational environment has a number of implications for U.S. strategy in the Middle East:

- Experience of the past three decades confirms the wisdom that wars are rarely constructive acts and are generally better judged by what they prevent than what they accomplish.<sup>21</sup> The United States should therefore have modest expectations of what military intervention in the region can achieve. Yet it should also be aware

of the potential for transformational diplomacy, such as that presented by the 1973 war, which enabled the United States to turn Egypt into an ally and to lay the foundation for the Egypt-Israel peace treaty.

- ▣ There will be times—for instance, the 1991 Gulf War, Afghanistan post-9/11, and Iraq after Mosul’s fall to IS in 2014—when *intervention may be necessary and its impact salutary and enduring*. More often, however, the intended benefits of intervention will be ephemeral. The scope and nature of future American interventions and the way the U.S. military is employed should therefore be tailored to the operational environment of this volatile region and the interests at stake.
- ▣ The United States should abandon “solutionism”—a fixation on solving the region’s problems. At least for now, the best the U.S. can hope for is to shape, influence, and thereby manage those problems that directly affect American interests by disrupting and mitigating threats emanating from the region, while encouraging and building on positive trends.
- ▣ The success of U.S. counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts will often depend on the politics of America’s regional partners; yet the persistence of the region’s zero-sum, winner-take-all political culture will contribute to the resilience of the extremist groups and terrorist networks the United States is now fighting, and the intractability of these conflicts.

The factors that have made it so difficult for the United States and its allies to consolidate military victories also present opportunities to undermine, or roll back, adversaries’ achievements. The region, however, is not self-organizing; to accomplish this, the United States would need to work with local partners against its adversaries, just as it did vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in the Middle East in the 1970s and in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

8.

## Disjointed Strategy: Aligning Ways, Means, and Ends

STRATEGY IS ABOUT choosing appropriate “ways” and adequate “means” to achieve realistic and attainable “ends.”<sup>22</sup> Coherently aligning ways, means, and ends while balancing risk and time available are the prerequisites of *effective* strategy. Yet the United States has often failed to align and balance these factors in many of its Middle East military interventions since the 1991 Gulf War. That other Great Powers, past and present, have often done no better offers little consolation; there is a rich literature identifying the roots of America’s uneven strategic performance, and while strategy will always remain hard (for reasons explained in Chapter 13), the United States must do better.<sup>23</sup> Its vital interests depend on it.

The 1991 Gulf War was a strategic masterpiece and a major success. The United States set a realistic and attainable goal—the liberation of Kuwait—allocated sufficient resources, and created a broad coalition to accomplish the mission. The war played to traditional U.S. strengths and its preferred “way of war”: the defeat of conventional forces on open terrain, thanks to overwhelming training and technological advantages. The war advanced key U.S. interests and greatly enhanced its credibility and prestige—although its termination was marred by inadequate planning and inadequate political guidance from Washington, resulting in ad hoc decisions by in-theater commanders during ceasefire negotiations with the Iraqis.<sup>24</sup> As a result, Saddam was effectively permitted a free hand to crush postwar uprisings in his country’s north and south, leading him to conclude that he had won the war’s most important battle.<sup>25</sup>

The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and of Iraq in 2003 both started well enough, but in both cases the United States was a victim of its suc-

cess. The Americans were able, with relatively small forces, to bring about the collapse of Taliban rule in Afghanistan and the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. In both cases, however, it failed to defeat its enemies, who went to ground and returned as insurgents. And in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States was slow to recognize that fact. Paradoxically, rapid and decisive military victories undermined long-term prospects for stability in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Efforts to stabilize Afghanistan were hampered by the early redirection of resources and focus to Iraq (a problem that worsened as the Iraqi insurgency intensified), an early emphasis on counterterrorism rather than counterinsurgency operations (resulting in an overreliance on military force, thereby antagonizing the population and contributing to the Taliban's resurgence), and attempts to create a strong central government—contrary to nearly all of Afghanistan's historical experience.<sup>26</sup> Efforts to train Afghan security forces languished until relatively late in the war, when the task was finally pursued with urgency, and some success.<sup>27</sup>

The dramatic deterioration of the security situation resulting from the Taliban's resurgence required the United States to launch an Afghan surge in 2009 with 30,000 troops—fewer than the military deemed necessary—with a misguided focus on Helmand rather than Kandahar province, which was the center of gravity of the counterinsurgency campaign. (The latter decision was driven primarily by interservice and coalition-related concerns.<sup>28</sup>) Nevertheless, the surge produced a significant decline in violence, although its effects did not outlive the withdrawal of the surge forces in 2012. Violence has increased, and the security situation in Afghanistan has again become rather tenuous.

The United States faced many of the same problems in Iraq as in Afghanistan, despite devoting much greater resources to the effort. The United States invaded with sufficient forces to overthrow the regime but not to stabilize the country thereafter; it dismantled the Iraqi army, the one organization that could have aided in this task; and de-Baathification and democratization were seen by many Sunnis as policies intended to diminish their influence in post-Saddam Iraq, leading them to violently resist the U.S. occupation.

Early efforts to stabilize Iraq were characterized by competing approaches—some relying heavily on aggressive tactics that helped catalyze the nascent Iraqi insurgency.<sup>29</sup> Although rebuilding the Iraqi army was seen as key to the U.S. exit strategy, the effort was consis-

tently underresourced and characterized by “adhocracy.”<sup>30</sup> And while the United States committed 30,000 troops in 2007 to a surge to stabilize the country, efforts to build on the surge’s achievements by fostering reconciliation proved inadequate. Indeed, neither the theory behind reconciliation in Iraq, nor the relationship between bottom-up and top-down reconciliation efforts, was ever formally articulated.<sup>31</sup>

In both Afghanistan and Iraq, host-nation politics was the Achilles’ heel of U.S. efforts to transform counterinsurgency successes into sustainable political outcomes.

In both countries, moreover, ways and means were out of joint. The United States consistently underresourced its military efforts, was constantly forced to play catch-up, and in each case was eventually compelled to implement a military and civilian surge along with a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign to achieve a degree of stability prior to a U.S. drawdown. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, senior generals avoided imposing a common approach for dealing with the insurgency until relatively late in the game, lest they violate the U.S. military’s ethos of decentralized execution, although they ultimately recognized the need to do so.<sup>32</sup>

In both Iraq and Afghanistan, key policy decisions undermined the military effort, while military strategy was often disconnected from the political realities that guided U.S. policy and that dictated time and resources available.<sup>33</sup> And in both countries, the United States pursued ambitious and perhaps unrealistic ends that ran counter to the countries’ historical experience: a strong central government in Afghanistan and a broad-based, inclusive government in Iraq—although after overthrowing Saddam, Washington probably could not have done otherwise.<sup>34</sup>

Following its 2011 withdrawal from Iraq, the United States largely pursued a policy of nonintervention in the region to avoid getting sucked into the insurrections and wars that followed that year’s Arab uprisings. The exception that proved the rule was Libya, in which the United States enabled NATO intervention (by “leading from behind”), initially to prevent a massacre and subsequently to overthrow the regime.

The messy aftermath of the Libya intervention, however, reinforced the administration’s predisposition to not intervene in Syria.<sup>35</sup> Yet nonintervention in Syria’s civil war, and the meager resourcing of covert and overt train-and-equip efforts for the Syrian opposition starting in 2012, contributed to the Islamic State’s rise in Syria and its subsequent emer-

gence in Iraq.<sup>36</sup> As administration officials were to ruefully note: “In Iraq, the United States had intervened and occupied—and things had gone to hell. In Libya, the United States had intervened but not occupied—and things had gone to hell. And in Syria, the United States had neither intervened nor occupied—and things had still gone to hell.”<sup>37</sup>

Like prior efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. counter-IS campaign in Iraq and Syria since August 2014 suffers from a failure to align ways, means, and ends:

- ▣ The United States has devoted inadequate resources to an unrealistic objective—to “degrade, and ultimately destroy,” IS. Coalition aircraft have flown ten to twenty sorties a day against IS throughout most of the campaign,<sup>38</sup> while Washington has committed 3,870 troops to the advise-and-assist mission in Iraq,<sup>39</sup> and imposed restrictive rules of engagement that have hindered the effective use of airpower and ground advisors.<sup>40</sup>
- ▣ U.S. inaction in response to the Syrian civil war and the exclusionary politics of Iraq’s Nouri al-Maliki government, the perception that Washington is tacitly aligned with Tehran against the region’s Sunnis, and the commitment of America’s first airstrikes in Iraq on behalf of beleaguered Yazidis, Turkmen, and Kurds—anybody but Sunni Arabs—were a recruiting boon for jihadist groups like IS.
- ▣ America did not do much to assist the Syrian opposition, at least in part, to avoid jeopardizing a nuclear deal with Iran, Syria’s foremost regional ally. Yet the sanctions-relief component of the nuclear deal will provide Iran with tens of billions of dollars to pursue destabilizing regional policies, further fueling the region’s sectarian conflicts and undermining U.S. interests.
- ▣ The United States insisted that oppositionists recruited as part of its overt train-and-equip effort agree to fight only IS. The moderate opposition, as well as America’s partners in the effort—Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—wanted the opposition to fight the Assad regime. The U.S. stance stymied efforts to recruit Syrian opposition fighters and ultimately led to the train-and-equip program’s cancellation.<sup>41</sup>

- U.S. efforts to counter IS and al-Qaeda affiliates are often held hostage to the politics of its regional partners. Some have provided financial and military support to groups that subsequently allied with or pledged fealty to Jabhat al-Nusra or IS, because these jihadist groups were seen as the most effective opponents of the Assad regime.<sup>42</sup> In this way, support for less-extreme opposition groups often redounded to the benefit of more extreme groups.<sup>43</sup> And some U.S. partners have supported Jabhat al-Nusra directly.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, while Iraqi prime minister Haidar al-Abadi has taken some important first steps toward creating a more inclusive government, he has not succeeded in changing the zero-sum politics in Iraq that led to the rise of IS, or been able to address Sunni grievances; facing strong resistance from within his own party and from his domestic opponents—as well as Iran—the Abadi government’s Sunni outreach remains stillborn. Iraqi politics, and the politics of America’s other regional partners, remains a major obstacle to defeating IS.

## Assessment

The Middle East’s complexity poses serious enough policy challenges. Yet, U.S. policymakers have often compounded matters by failing to effectively manage or prioritize competing demands and incompatible objectives, thereby undermining American military efforts in the region. In some cases, this appears to have been a conscious choice (e.g., prioritizing a nuclear deal with Iran over support for the opposition in Syria). In other cases, it is not clear that U.S. decisionmakers realized they were considering policy options that would hamstring U.S. military efforts (e.g., talk about cooperating with Tehran against IS, which energized the latter’s efforts to mobilize Sunnis).<sup>45</sup> And in yet other cases, the United States eschewed actions that could have helped it manage these contradictions (e.g., pushing back against Tehran’s regional activities while seeking a nuclear agreement with the Islamic Republic).<sup>46</sup>

More broadly, America’s costly military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have sapped its willingness to countenance new military commitments in the Middle East, undermining the U.S. deterrence posture in the region and beyond.<sup>47</sup> These campaigns have imposed significant opportunity costs, diverting resources and the energies of senior

decisionmakers from pressing issues in other parts of the world—particularly East Asia. The challenge, then, is to find a sustainable level of diplomatic and military engagement in the region sufficient to safeguard and advance U.S. interests there, without imposing prohibitive costs on U.S. interests elsewhere.

## Post-9/11 CT Campaigns against al-Qaeda and IS

ACCORDING TO the bipartisan 9/11 Commission, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, resulted from failures of imagination, policy, capabilities, and management.<sup>48</sup> In particular, the United States failed to realize that it was already at war with al-Qaeda. Since then, the United States has struggled, with only mixed success, to come to grips with the challenge posed by al-Qaeda and jihadist groups like it.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the United States launched a global counterterrorism campaign against al-Qaeda (and eventually the Islamic State) that continues today. This has required the development of new authorities and capabilities for its counterterrorism toolkit, including “enhanced” interrogation techniques, Special Forces capture and kill operations, the ability to conduct targeted killings by drones and aircraft, and dramatically expanded intelligence-sharing authorities to enable foreign partners to conduct investigations, arrests, and debriefings of detainees.<sup>49</sup> Because many of these activities are shrouded in secrecy, the public’s understanding of U.S. counterterrorism efforts against al-Qaeda and IS contains many gaps. However, at least some tentative observations can be made regarding the overall success of this effort, and in particular about the use of drone strikes—one of the campaign’s more controversial elements.

While reliable data on this topic is scarce, the United States is believed to have conducted well over 1,000 drone strikes—more than 400 in Pakistan, 300 in Afghanistan, 100 in Yemen, 20 in Somalia, and hundreds more in Syria and Iraq (although many of the strikes in Iraq may have been in support of conventional combat operations). The

overwhelming majority of these strikes occurred during the Obama administration.<sup>50</sup> Allies have conducted hundreds of additional drone strikes.<sup>51</sup> These strikes have killed several thousand people, including a significant, if uncertain number of civilians.<sup>52</sup> The United States has also conducted scores of air and cruise missile strikes against high-value targets, and a number of Special Forces raids targeting key individuals—the most famous of these being that on Osama bin Laden’s residence in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in May 2011, in which the al-Qaeda founder was killed.

In the past, Washington often tried to capture and interrogate suspected terrorists, to obtain intelligence for follow-on operations. But this has been greatly curtailed because so many potential high-value targets now operate in areas where their capture would be extremely risky. Targeted killing is now the default option.<sup>53</sup> Yet, as shown by the May 2015 raid near Deir al-Zour in eastern Syria that led to the killing of Abu Sayyaf, the IS official who oversaw the group’s Levant oil, gas, and financial operations, the United States will still, when feasible, conduct raids to capture personnel and seize documents and electronic media that might facilitate follow-on operations.<sup>54</sup>

Advocates of drone strikes say that they keep the targeted groups off-balance, on the defensive, and may disrupt planning for terrorist operations by eliminating key personnel (commanders, planners, trainers, bomb makers, financiers, recruiters, operatives, and propagandists) and that they allow the United States to limit risk while targeting those who wish it harm. Academic studies have concluded that the success of these strikes may depend on the age, size, organizational complexity, and ideological/religious complexion of a group, although more research needs to be done on this topic.<sup>55</sup>

Critics argue that because targeted killings are so easy, there is a tendency to overrely on them. They claim that the targeted organizations may become more fragmented and ruthless, and that targeted killings often lead to the rise of younger, more radical, more capable commanders.<sup>56</sup> They also argue that “signature strikes” based on pattern-of-life analysis, kill innocent civilians and are therefore often counterproductive because they radicalize the population—whetting the appetite for revenge and generating popular support for groups that the United States is targeting.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the use of armed drones

has spurred America's enemies to develop similar capabilities, which may someday be used against U.S. citizens. Finally, and most important, they argue that the appeal of drones has created a situation in which tactics drive strategy.<sup>58</sup>

## Assessment

The main shortcoming of many of these critiques is that they focus too much on tactics, while failing to address the broader strategic context of the counterterrorism and military campaigns against groups such as IS and al-Qaeda. Washington's policies have helped fuel many of the conflicts that its Middle Eastern counterterrorism and military campaigns seek to quash. The impact of these errant policies has often been regional in scope and geopolitical in scale; drone or air campaigns are inadequate tools for dealing with problems that are rooted in problematic local politics and U.S. policies.

That there has not been another 9/11-type attack in the United States is a major achievement, attributable to a combination of sustained focus, good intelligence work, persistent pressure on al-Qaeda, and the incompetence of enemies that include the likes of the so-called underwear and Times Square bombers—who attempted attacks in December 2009 and May 2010, respectively.

Yet al-Qaeda has grown and spread, and spawned IS, which now rivals and in many places overshadows it. These jihadist groups' activity and reach are greater than ever before, even if their appeal remains quite limited in absolute terms.<sup>59</sup> Thus, during the war in Afghanistan (1979–1989), 5,000–10,000 foreign fighters are believed to have traveled there from various parts of the Arab world to fight the Soviets. During the war in Iraq (2003–2011), 4,000–6,000 foreign fighters are believed to have traveled to Iraq to fight—with the overwhelming majority from Saudi Arabia and Libya.<sup>60</sup> By comparison, in only five years of fighting in Syria, more than 35,000 foreign fighters from more than 120 countries are believed to have traveled there to fight. The jihadist mobilization on behalf of Syria is unprecedented.<sup>61</sup>

Since 9/11, some forty-five Americans have been killed in the United States by jihadist terrorists and about 160 more have been killed in terrorist attacks abroad.<sup>62</sup> This is a signal success for U.S. counterterrorism policy. Yet the number of terrorist incidents in the Middle East

and North Africa, attributed largely to jihadist terrorists of one kind or another, has increased more than fivefold during this period, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, some of the groups most heavily targeted by the United States—such as IS, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and the Taliban—have, by all indications, increased the pace and scope of their operations.<sup>64</sup> Given this reality, calls to reassess the advisability and efficacy of the techniques used to fight these groups, and drone strikes in particular, seem to be in order.<sup>65</sup> It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the United States is not “winning” the war against jihadist terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa.

10.

## Deterrence, Compellence, and Assurance

WHILE AMERICA'S protracted counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns and conventional wars have been the primary focus of most analyses of the U.S. military's role in the Middle East, the threat or use of force to deter or compel adversaries and enemies, and to assure partners and allies, has been central to U.S. policy in the region and the primary justification of the large U.S. forward presence there.<sup>66</sup> Deterrence is a core U.S. military mission, and assurance is one of its most important derivative benefits.<sup>67</sup> Compellence has also been central to U.S. Middle East policy.<sup>68</sup> Yet a survey of U.S. efforts in the Middle East to use limited force to deter, compel, and assure shows that its performance of these critical national security tasks has been uneven, at best, and that important lessons can be derived from the study of these past episodes.

### Case Study 1: Successful Intervention

#### *Tanker Reflagging Operations during the Iran-Iraq War*

In response to Iranian small-boat attacks on neutral shipping during the Iran-Iraq War, the United States initiated Operation Earnest Will in July 1987, the mission to escort reflagged Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Gulf.<sup>69</sup> Washington warned Tehran through the Swiss embassy to not attack the convoys with Silkworm missiles as they passed through the Strait of Hormuz, and assumed that the presence of the USS *Kitty Hawk* carrier battle group in the Arabian Sea would deter Iran from otherwise challenging the convoys. Deterrence failed before the very first convoy reached its destination, when the reflagged tanker *Bridgeton* struck a mine.<sup>70</sup> Due to the limited damage and lack of casualties, the United

States opted not to respond, in order to avoid giving Iran a pretext to retaliate via terrorist attacks.

With the commencement of the convoys, Iran dramatically reduced small-boat attacks and challenged the United States indirectly, through covertly sown minefields. Iran gradually ramped up small-boat attacks and mining operations in September 1987—and the United States even caught an Iranian ship, the *Iran Ajr*, in the act of laying mines. In the following month, Iran launched two Silkworm missiles at a reflagged tanker in Kuwaiti waters, thereby skirting the U.S. redline against Silkworm attacks on Hormuz shipping. (The Iranians launched captured Iraqi Silkworms from the occupied al-Faw Peninsula, perhaps to obscure the missiles' origins.) The United States responded by destroying two Iranian oil platforms used to stage these attacks. Iran responded with yet another Silkworm strike against Kuwaiti oil terminals.

Iranian attacks on unescorted vessels nearly doubled during the next six months, and the Iranians countered more aggressive U.S. tactics in February 1988 with another mining operation. After the USS *Samuel B. Roberts* struck a mine in April 1988, the U.S. Navy destroyed two Iranian oil platforms used to support Iranian naval operations in the Gulf. The Iranian navy responded by attacking several U.S. ships, leading to a series of naval engagements that culminated on April 18, 1988 with Operation Praying Mantis, in which the U.S. Navy sunk an Iranian missile boat, frigate, and small boat and damaged an additional Iranian frigate and several small boats.

This marked the end of Iranian mining operations but not attacks on shipping, which declined sharply for the duration of the war. In July 1988, during one of these increasingly rare surface actions, the USS *Vincennes* accidentally shot down an Iranian Air Bus, believing it was an attacking Iranian fighter jet. All 290 passengers aboard perished. Iran, however, thought this was an intentional act; the perception that the United States was entering the conflict on Iraq's side contributed to the Iranian decision to end the war.<sup>71</sup>

In sum, contrary to expectations, Tehran was not deterred by U.S. intervention, and the often-restrained U.S. response to attacks emboldened it. Iran challenged the United States by indirect means (covertly sown minefields), circumvented U.S. redlines by using Silkworm missiles against reflagged merchant ships when they were no longer under

escort, and gradually stepped up attacks on shipping to impose costs on the United States—although it eventually pulled back when its own costs became prohibitive. Thus, while it was not possible to deter Iran from continuing attacks on Gulf shipping, the U.S. intervention deterred direct attacks on reflagged ships traveling in convoys, led to a reduction in direct attacks on ships not protected by convoys, and forced the Islamic Republic to rely on indirect means, such as mines, to harass Gulf shipping. The U.S. policy of bringing about a diplomatic solution by intervening to prevent either side from winning ultimately succeeded.<sup>72</sup> But it was a tragic accident—the downing of the Iranian Airbus—that finally convinced Tehran to agree to a ceasefire.

The American intervention, moreover, cemented the close U.S. military relationship with the Gulf states, and established a principle—that the United States would act to ensure freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf—which remains in effect to this day. Thus, after warning the United States in December 2011 that it would close the Strait of Hormuz if new sanctions were imposed, Iran backed off after senior U.S. officials intimated that such a move would prompt a military response.<sup>73</sup> Likewise, in January 2012, after warning the United States that it should not return an aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf, Iran backed down after Washington did just that.<sup>74</sup> Operation Earnest Will demonstrates the importance of reputation and credibility in international affairs, and how seminal events can continue to influence partners and adversaries decades later.

## Case Study 2: Deterrence Challenges

### *Iranian Terrorist, Subversion, and Proxy Operations*

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, terrorism, subversion, and proxy operations have been core elements of Tehran's foreign policy. Iran-sponsored and inspired terrorist and proxy operations have claimed hundreds of American lives worldwide, and the lives of hundreds of citizens of other states. Iranian or Iran-supported operations or activities include:

- ▣ The April 1983 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut, which killed 63, and the October 1983 bombing of U.S. Marine and French paratrooper barracks by Lebanese Hezbollah, which killed 241 Marines and 58 paratroopers and led to these forces' withdrawal from Lebanon;<sup>75</sup>

- ▣ The December 1983 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Kuwait by the Iraqi Dawa organization, which killed five local embassy employees;<sup>76</sup>
- ▣ The March 1992 and July 1994 bombings of the Israeli embassy and a Jewish community center, respectively, in Buenos Aires by Lebanese Hezbollah, which killed more than 100 people, and wounded more than 500;<sup>77</sup>
- ▣ The June 1996 bombing of a U.S. military housing complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, by Saudi Hezbollah, which killed 19 U.S. service members and wounded 372 others;<sup>78</sup>
- ▣ The provision of arms and training between 2003 and 2011 to Shi'ite special groups that attacked and killed hundreds of U.S. service members in Iraq;<sup>79</sup>
- ▣ A series of attacks on Saudi diplomats in Pakistan and Egypt, and an attempt to recruit a Mexican narco-terrorist to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington DC after Saudi forces helped Bahrain quash protests by largely Shi'ite oppositionists in March 2011;<sup>80</sup>
- ▣ A series of planned attacks in February 2012 on Israeli diplomats in Turkey, Georgia, India, and Thailand by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) operatives to avenge the killing of Iranian nuclear scientists, as well as a series of subsequent planned attacks in Cyprus, Kenya, and Nigeria;<sup>81</sup>
- ▣ Threats by Iraqi Shi'ite militias to attack U.S. troops if American combat units return to Iraq.<sup>82</sup>

Thirty years of interaction have effectively taught Tehran that it can wage proxy warfare against the United States without risking a military response or paying an unacceptable cost, since America has never retaliated militarily for Iranian terrorist or proxy attacks.<sup>83</sup> As a result, Iran has continued with terror and proxy operations, managing risk by striking only intermittently. Indeed, Iran apparently felt sufficiently immune from retaliation to plan the aforementioned attack in Washington DC in 2011 that could have produced a large number of civilian casualties.

When the United States has apprehended individuals involved in

Iran-sponsored terrorism—such as Mansour Arbabsiar, the operative who recruited a narco-terrorist to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to Washington—the United States has used law enforcement tools to try, convict, and jail them. But the United States has consistently eschewed military approaches to deterring Iranian terrorism due largely to concerns about Iran’s capabilities, U.S. vulnerabilities, and the potential for escalation—thereby ensuring the continued use of terrorism against the United States.

It remains unclear what impact the nuclear deal with Iran will have on the use of terrorism against the United States. Although greater restraint, at least in the near term, is likely, should Iran resume terrorist attacks on the United States in the future, a more balanced approach that incorporates reprisals to restore deterrence may be in order if Washington hopes to prevent additional attacks. However, the considerations that hindered past efforts to formulate an effective deterrent policy toward Iranian terrorism will likely hinder future efforts as well.

Washington will remain concerned about Iranian capabilities, U.S. vulnerabilities, the potential for escalation, and—depending on the policy orientation of future administrations—possible impacts on the nuclear accord. For this reason, Washington may employ less provocative, nonlethal “dirty tricks,” as it did in response to the Khobar Towers strike, when it “outed” Iranian intelligence agents in dozens of countries in order to impose a cost without provoking another attack.<sup>84</sup> The impact of such nonlethal measures, however, is likely to be limited in scope and short in duration.

### **Case Study 3: Terra Nova**

#### *Iranian Cyber Operations*

Cyber is emerging as Tehran’s weapon of choice in dealing with domestic opponents and foreign adversaries. Iran is interested in cyber because of its low entry costs, and because it fits well with elements of its strategic culture, including a preference for ambiguity, standoff, and indirection when conducting high-risk activities.<sup>85</sup>

Cyber offers Tehran low-risk options not permitted by its current deterrent/warfighting triad, which consists of (1) the ability to close the Strait of Hormuz, (2) terrorism, and (3) long-range missile strike capabilities. It can be used in peacetime, since norms have not been estab-

lished with regard to whether cyber spying or cyberattacks can be considered an act of war justifying military retaliation.

The inchoate state of international cyber norms, moreover, provides Iran with margin for maneuver, and with the opportunity to shape these norms so that its cyber spying and offensive cyber operations become a tolerated form of behavior, much as its use of terrorism is tolerated by broad swaths of the international community. And because it is difficult to attribute responsibility for cyberattacks without compromising sensitive methods, Tehran may hope to preserve a degree of deniability for its activities in this domain.

In response to the Stuxnet attack on its nuclear program, Iran reportedly launched in 2011 a cyber spying campaign that targeted individuals, government entities, and critical infrastructure in at least sixteen countries, including oil and gas companies, major defense contractors, U.S. military installations, airports, major airlines and transportation networks, telecommunications and technology firms, educational institutions, health care providers, and a dam in upstate New York.<sup>86</sup> These activities are likely intended to have a deterrent effect on the United States and others, because they may indicate an intent to conduct pre-attack reconnaissance of networks associated with critical infrastructure. And since the July 2015 nuclear deal with the P5+1/EU, Iran has reportedly ramped up cyber-spying operations against U.S. officials, journalists, and academics engaged in Iran policy, presumably for intelligence purposes.<sup>87</sup>

Iran has also engaged in offensive cyber operations. In response to the discovery of Stuxnet (2010), the imposition of tough economic sanctions on its financial sector (2011), and cyberattacks on its petrochemical sector (2012), Iran conducted cyberattacks on Aramco, the Saudi state-owned oil company (2012), and distributed denial-of-service attacks on the U.S. stock exchange and several major U.S. banks (2012–2013). And it attacked the computer networks of the Sands casino and hotel chain in response to hostile statements by its owner, the billionaire Sheldon Adelson (2014).<sup>88</sup>

Because cyber norms are still unformed, the boundaries between the acceptable and unacceptable are unclear. Moreover, because it is hard to make a credible public case for attribution without compromising sensitive U.S. capabilities, general deterrence may be unattainable. The best that can be hoped for may be to deter certain types of cyberattacks against certain types of targets, under certain circumstances.<sup>89</sup>

Achieving even that outcome, however, will require a better understanding of deterrence and escalation dynamics in the cyber domain, and addressing the credibility gap that has often hindered deterrence of Tehran in the physical domain (e.g., attacks on neutral shipping during the Iran-Iraq War, Iranian proxy terrorism). And it will probably require the formulation of international cyber norms that can be used as leverage against Tehran, just as the latter's violation of norms regarding human rights, diplomatic immunity, the targeting of civilians (terrorism), and arms control has facilitated the imposition of sanctions on Iran.

Meanwhile, the recent U.S. indictment of seven Iranian computer specialists who carried out a number of the aforementioned cyber-spying operations and cyberattacks on behalf of the IRGC was probably intended to deter future attacks by "naming and shaming" the individuals involved. It is likely to have little more than symbolic value, however, as the individuals involved will likely remain beyond America's reach, and the indictment is likely to spur Iranian counterindictments against U.S. cyber warriors.

## **Case Study 4: The Wages of Containment**

### *Iraq during and after Operation Desert Storm*

When in July 1990 Iraq accused Kuwait of stealing its oil, no senior U.S. official believed the Iraqis would resolve the crisis by invading their neighbor. Preoccupied with momentous developments in Europe, including the reunification of Germany, Washington told Baghdad, through Ambassador April Glaspie, that it had no opinion regarding the dispute between the two countries. This led Saddam Hussein to conclude that if he invaded Kuwait, the United States would live with the *fait accompli*. When Iraq finally invaded in August, the United States responded by rapidly dispatching forces to the region to deter a possible follow-on attack on Saudi Arabia.<sup>90</sup>

The American decision to expel Iraq from Kuwait by force ensured that the United States would be involved in Iraq's postwar containment through UN sanctions and inspections to root out its weapons of mass destruction. In the decade that followed the 1991 Gulf War, the United States conducted air and cruise missile strikes and military deployments in response to Iraqi obstruction of UN weapons inspections and interference with no-fly zone operations, and to deter Iraqi aggression against Kuwait and the Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq.<sup>91</sup> It also conducted an

ineffectual covert campaign to overthrow Saddam. Major activities during this period included:

- ▣ **ENFORCING WEAPONS INSPECTIONS/NO-FLY ZONES (January 1993):** In the waning days of the George H. W. Bush administration, the Iraqi air force attempted to down a U.S. aircraft as a parting shot at the president who led Operation Desert Storm. The United States responded with a series of air and cruise missile strikes, the downing of Iraqi MiG-25 and MiG-29 fighters, the destruction of Iraqi air-defense radars and command and control sites, and a strike on a facility formerly tied to Iraq's nuclear weapons program. The results were short-lived; in April, Iraq resumed its challenges to the southern no-fly zone and its "cheat and retreat" tactics vis-à-vis UN weapons inspections.
- ▣ **DETECTING TERRORISM (June 1993):** In response to the discovery of an April 1993 plot to assassinate former president George H. W. Bush during a visit to Kuwait, the United States launched a cruise missile strike against Iraqi General Intelligence Directorate headquarters in Baghdad. The raid was conducted in the middle of the night to limit Iraqi casualties.
- ▣ **DETECTING THREATS TO KUWAIT (October 1994, Operation Vigilant Warrior):** In response to Iraq's deployment of 20,000 Republican Guard troops to southern Iraq, the United States deployed 28,000 soldiers and 350 additional aircraft to Kuwait and the region, while the United Nations called on Iraq to withdraw its forces and created a no-drive zone in southern Iraq. The Iraqis withdrew their reinforcements, while the United States left ground forces in Kuwait and combat aircraft in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Iraq never again threatened Kuwait this way, but Saddam had demonstrated that he could force the Americans to deploy large forces at great expense.
- ▣ **FOILED COUP ATTEMPTS (March 1995, June 1996):** Following the 1991 Gulf War, Washington pursued a two-track policy toward Iraq consisting of (1) containment through sanctions, weapons inspections, and deterrence; and (2) covert action to topple Saddam Hussein. The United States aided and encouraged two opposition groups: the Iraqi National Congress (INC)

and the Iraqi National Accord (INA). The INC attempted to initiate a “rolling coup” in March 1995 in the hope of prompting U.S. military intervention on its behalf, but the effort foundered, and the hoped-for U.S. intervention never occurred. And in June 1996, Iraqi security forces arrested more than a hundred military officers who had been recruited by the INA to conduct a coup against the regime. Iraq’s September 1996 move into northern Iraq rolled up the remnants of the CIA network behind these covert operations.<sup>92</sup>

- ▣ **RESTORING DETERRENCE (September 1996, Operation Desert Strike):** In late August 1996, Iraq sent a force of 350 tanks and 30,000–40,000 troops into Erbil, in northern Iraq, at the invitation of Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) chief Masoud Barzani, then engaged in a conflict with the rival Kurdish faction—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Iraqi forces captured and killed scores of Iraqis affiliated with a CIA-sponsored covert network and forced the United States to evacuate 6,500 Kurds associated with the INC and foreign NGOs. The Americans responded with cruise missile strikes launched from the Gulf against Iraqi air defenses in the south of the country—since Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia had not permitted airstrikes from their territory—and by augmenting the 1,200 soldiers already in Kuwait by 5,000. Moreover, it extended the northern boundary of the southern no-fly zone to Baghdad’s southern suburbs, enhancing U.S. early warning against possible Iraqi military moves.
- ▣ **TARGETING WMD INFRASTRUCTURE (December 1998, Operation Desert Fox):** In response to Baghdad’s renewed obstruction of weapons inspections, coalition forces launched four nights of strikes in mid-December 1998 against WMD-related targets: missile infrastructure and remotely piloted aircraft configured to deliver biological weapons, command-and-control facilities, Republican Guard and Special Republican Guard barracks, and refineries that helped Iraq bust sanctions on its oil industry. The strikes on the regime’s praetorian units left it shaken and helped spark unrest in the largely Shiite south. Saddam responded defiantly, challenging the no-fly zones thereafter almost daily. For its part, the coalition adopted more permissive rules of engagement

that allowed it to wear down Iraq's air defenses—although the rules were eventually tightened and not loosened again until mid-2002, during the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.<sup>93</sup>

Overall, the containment of Iraq was a qualified success. Saddam was kept in his “box,” unable to threaten his neighbors, although the policy came at a high price politically, economically, and militarily, and had the undesirable effect of strengthening the regime's grip on power.<sup>94</sup> Washington's assumption of an open-ended commitment to contain Hussein, moreover, set the stage for the subsequent invasion of Iraq.

The 1990s effort to contain Iraq blended deterrence and compellence at the tactical, strategic, and policy levels, and reinforced a number of lessons: that, in general, compellence is more difficult than deterrence,<sup>95</sup> that coercive diplomacy is difficult to sustain over time—particularly when employed by a multinational coalition; and that the cumulative costs of coercive diplomacy may eventually erode domestic and international support for the policy.<sup>96</sup>

Thus, whereas in 1991 the UN Security Council was united over sanctions and weapons inspections on Iraq, by the late 1990s it was riven by deep divisions over sanctions, which were fraying, while the U.S. had grown weary of enforcing weapons inspections. Moreover, containment had engendered an anti-American backlash in the region, and contributed to the rise of al-Qaeda.

Iraq never ceased resisting the weapons inspections and no-fly zones,<sup>97</sup> which it saw as an affront to and infringement of its sovereignty. It sought to wear down U.S. resolve through constant challenges and acts of defiance. The United States tended to respond predictably, with limited strikes against assets linked to provocations—such as air-defense sites that had threatened coalition aircraft. This allowed Saddam to manage risk, limit the cost of brinkmanship, and thereby sustain Iraq's policy of defiance.

It is not clear that a more aggressive approach would have been more effective, given that Saddam had massive quantities of military hardware to throw away and that he was highly motivated to resist because he believed he was fighting for his life and could not afford to appear weak. At any rate, host-nation caveats to the rules of engagement and U.S. political constraints precluded more aggressive asymmetric targeting.<sup>98</sup>

The containment of Iraq in the 1990s demonstrated that while deter-

rence and coercion of determined adversaries can be challenging due to asymmetries in interests, motivation, and risk tolerance, important policy aims can be realized. Iraq was “functionally” disarmed thanks to sanctions and inspections—although this achievement came at a price. And while general deterrence of a motivated adversary proved elusive, the United States succeeded in deterring specific courses of action—such as another invasion of Kuwait—showing that immediate deterrence is possible.<sup>99</sup> Finally, had the United States a credible covert-action capability, it might have escaped the contradictions engendered by its containment policy and achieved regime change without invading Iraq.

## Case Study 5: Faded Redlines

### *The Failure to Deter Syrian Chemical Weapons Use*

As the tide in Syria’s civil war turned against the Assad regime in early 2012, Washington became increasingly concerned that the country’s chemical weapons (CW) stockpile would fall into the hands of terrorists, or be used by the regime against opposition fighters and their supporters. In July 2012, a Syrian government spokesman acknowledged for the first time that the regime possessed CW. This statement was widely perceived as a warning that the regime was preparing to use these weapons.

In response, warnings were conveyed by senior U.S. officials to their Syrian counterparts via Russia and Iran.<sup>100</sup> President Obama likewise warned President Assad publicly in August 2012 that “a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation.”<sup>101</sup> In subsequent statements, Obama stated that CW use would be “totally unacceptable” and that there would be “consequences”—although he did not specify what these would be.<sup>102</sup>

The president failed to subsequently tend to or bolster his redline, however, and as a result, Syria began using CW, perhaps as early as December 2012, escalating in March and April 2013 and culminating in an August 2013 sarin strike in a Damascus suburb that reportedly killed more than 1,500 civilians. The last attack occurred while UN inspectors were in Damascus to investigate claims of prior CW use.<sup>103</sup>

President Obama initially responded to this development by preparing a military strike to enforce his redline.<sup>104</sup> However, harboring strong misgivings regarding the efficacy of force in this case and the

possibility of getting drawn into another Middle Eastern war, the president overrode his principal foreign policy advisors and referred the matter to Congress for a vote, where sentiment was overwhelmingly opposed to military action. Apparently responding to an offhanded suggestion by U.S. secretary of state John Kerry—and perhaps prodding by Obama during the G-20 summit in St. Petersburg—Russia offered America a diplomatic out, which the latter accepted, that entailed Syria giving up its CW capabilities and acceding to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).<sup>105</sup>

Syria declared bulk mustard agent and unfilled munitions, which the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons destroyed; but it subsequently used chlorine gas against the rebels, and in the more than two years since, evidence has come to light indicating that Syria probably retained its arsenal of weaponized CW agents (sarin and VX), in violation of its CWC obligations.<sup>106</sup>

Much remains unclear about this entire episode. Why didn't President Obama bolster his redline after issuing it in order to avert either of two undesirable situations—one that would force him to make good on a threat he regretted, or one that would force him to renege on a public commitment? Why did Syria agree to destroy much of its CW arsenal and join the CWC, when it was already clear—at least to many in Washington—that the United States would not strike Syria due to presidential reticence and congressional opposition? Did Syria really agree to join the CWC because of the U.S. threat of force, as U.S. officials claim,<sup>107</sup> because of Russian pressure, or to placate the United States and Russia while secretly retaining its most lethal CW agents—providing it with a win-win option? More research is needed to determine Syria's decision calculus regarding its accession to the CWC.

The episode also sparked a debate regarding the impact of the failure to enforce the CW redline on U.S. credibility in the region and beyond.<sup>108</sup> Those who believe the incident affected U.S. credibility claim it likely contributed to Syria's continued use of improvised CW agents such as chlorine, and weakened U.S. leverage during nuclear negotiations with Iran by undermining President Obama's claim that "all options are on the table."<sup>109</sup> They likewise claim that the redline episode with Syria has emboldened Russia, China, and North Korea to challenge U.S. interests elsewhere.<sup>110</sup> Skeptics, such as President Obama, believe the foreign policy community tends to make a fetish of "credibility," and that "drop-

ping bombs on someone to prove that you're willing to drop bombs on someone is just about the worst reason to use force."<sup>111</sup> Experience, however, would seem to suggest that a country's reputation can confer lasting benefits, or prove an enduring liability (see Case Studies 1 and 2, above, respectively).

President Obama erred in declaring—without adequate forethought—a redline that he ultimately refused to uphold. However, once the redline was issued and then crossed, some kind of response was necessary to preserve U.S. credibility and deter additional challenges to American interests. And while the president was justified in eschewing a limited military strike that could have caused Damascus to dig in its heels, scuttled Russian diplomacy, and led to an open-ended intervention, bombing Syria was not the only military option available. The United States could have responded asymmetrically by ramping up support for the opposition, especially after Syria started using chlorine gas against civilians, to salvage American credibility, impose costs on Damascus, and gain leverage over the Assad regime.<sup>112</sup> While this response would have entailed its own set of complications, it would have been preferable to no response at all.

## **Case Study 6: Not by Sanctions Alone**

### *The Military Instrument and Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran*

In the decade-plus that the Great Powers held nuclear negotiations with Iran (2003–2015), the United States often struggled to find the proper role for the military instrument.<sup>113</sup> For most of this period, it relied mainly on economic and other sanctions to provide leverage over Tehran.

Yet U.S. military actions have sometimes influenced the calculus of proliferators. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 contributed to subsequent decisions by Libya to give up its known WMD programs<sup>114</sup> and by Iran to suspend those activities that were part of a “coordinated” effort to develop a nuclear explosive device—presumably to avoid giving the United States a reason to attack.<sup>115</sup> Iran's fears faded once it became clear that the United States had become mired in costly counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, and with the 2008 election of Barack Obama, who expressed a commitment to extricating the United States from the region's wars.

Historically, the United States has prioritized avoiding conflict with nuclear-threshold states over U.S. nuclear nonproliferation commitments. This was certainly the case regarding the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea; it remains to be seen whether the pattern will hold with Iran.<sup>116</sup> These precedents, and America's post-Afghanistan/Iraq hangover, raise additional doubts about the credibility of military prevention as a U.S. counterproliferation tool.

Senior Obama administration officials, moreover, undermined whatever residual utility the threat of force might have held for potential proliferators by publicly dismissing the efficacy of military strikes against Iran's nuclear program,<sup>117</sup> even as the president insisted that "all options remain on the table. Meanwhile, such warnings were increasingly greeted with derision by senior Iranian military officials.<sup>118</sup>

The president further complicated matters in September 2013 by reneging on prior threats to strike at Syria if it used chemical weapons, as discussed in the previous case study, and by his tendency to couch threats toward Iran in language that conveyed more ambivalence than resolve, sending mixed messages to both adversaries and allies.<sup>119</sup> And statements by the president that the alternative to a nuclear deal was war conveyed the impression that, if forced to choose, the United States would ultimately rather live with an Iranian bomb than take military action to avert such an eventuality.<sup>120</sup> As a result, Tehran no longer seemed to believe that the United States would use force to disrupt its nuclear program.<sup>121</sup>

Through such statements and actions, Washington may have divested itself of an important source of leverage during its nuclear negotiations with Tehran. Had it made the military option more credible, the P5+1/EU might have gotten a different deal than the one they eventually concluded with Iran—although one can only speculate now.

Finding the proper role for the military instrument (and the proper balance between threats and inducements) will be even more critical in the future, as the United States works to ensure Iran's adherence to the nuclear deal, and to deter an Iranian nuclear breakout. It is prudent to assume that based on its past behavior, Tehran will test the limits of the nuclear deal if it believes it can do so without getting caught, or without paying an unacceptable price. The threat of sanctions "snap-back" may not be sufficient to deter Iran from cheating, since it is not clear this

mechanism will work as advertised, especially in the event that foreign investment in Iran increases dramatically in the coming years. To be sustainable, then, the nuclear deal needs to be backstopped with the credible threat of force.

For this reason, Washington needs to address its credibility gap vis-à-vis Tehran—lest the Islamic Republic be tempted to test the limits of the accord by selectively complying or by attempting a clandestine slow-motion breakout. Here, Tehran’s assessment of the mettle and character of the president and the mood of the American people, and their acceptance of risk, will be as important as, if not more important than, its perception of U.S. military capabilities.<sup>122</sup>

Yet military threats are not what Iran’s leaders fear most. Instead, they believe that “soft warfare”—perceived efforts by Iran’s enemies to inculcate foreign ideas, values, and ideologies that undermine the strength, legitimacy, and social cohesion of the Islamic Republic—is a greater threat to the regime’s survival than a foreign military strike or invasion.<sup>123</sup> In a 2003 television address, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei explained this fear, echoing the frequent warnings of his predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, of a “cultural invasion”:

More than Iran’s enemies need artillery, guns and so forth, they need to spread cultural values that lead to moral corruption...If they arouse sexual desires [and] spread unrestrained mixing of men and women, and if they lead youth to behavior to which they are naturally inclined by instincts, there will no longer be any need for artillery and guns against that nation.<sup>124</sup>

It is for this reason that IRGC Commander Mohammad Ali Jafari stated on several occasions that the 2009 “sedition” against the country—that is, the popular protests spearheaded by the Green Movement following that year’s elections—“was much more dangerous than the [eight-year] imposed war” with Iraq.<sup>125</sup> The threat from within is seen as much greater than the threat from without. Exploiting such fears may provide Washington with the leverage needed to bolster the nuclear deal with Tehran and to deter a nuclear breakout, although operationalizing this concept could prove extremely challenging (as discussed below).

## **Case Study 7: America's Other Credibility Gap**

### *Assuring Allies and Partners*

To assure its Middle Eastern allies, the United States has transferred large quantities of arms and built security partnerships with friendly states, bolstered its forward military presence, and announced redlines to deter potential adversaries from undertaking certain actions. Yet in recent years, such measures have, more often than not, undermined rather than built confidence among U.S. allies, and raised questions about the credibility of informal U.S. security commitments to its partners in the region.<sup>126</sup>

The roots of the growing distrust of the United States can be traced to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the perception that it had, through incompetence or design, turned over Iraq—ruled until then by a Sunni Arab clique—to “the Shiites” and Iran. The Obama administration inadvertently reinforced this distrust by appearing too eager to court traditional enemies (e.g., Iran) at the expense of traditional allies (e.g., Israel and the Gulf Arab states) and by too quickly abandoning traditional friends like Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak during the so-called Arab Spring. Moreover, attempts to assure allies and partners have often exacerbated, rather than allayed, their fears.

Thus, the United States has sold tens of billions of dollars in arms to Israel and its Gulf Arab allies to deter and counter conventional aggression by Iran. Yet Tehran is much more likely to engage in subversion and proxy warfare, as it has done in the past and continues to do today—threats that conventional arms cannot counter. Moreover, the administration’s declared intent to “rebalance to Asia,” and the president’s assessment that “the U.S.’s core interests in the region are not oil,”<sup>127</sup> may convince Gulf Arab leaders that U.S. arms sales are really signs that America is providing its friends with the means to fend for themselves as it prepares to leave the region.

As impressive as America’s large forward presence may be, many allies question its purpose. After all, it failed to deter Iran from arming proxies that have killed hundreds of U.S. military personnel in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Afghanistan, from arming Palestinian terrorists who have killed hundreds of Israeli civilians, or from plotting attacks on

Saudi diplomats in Pakistan, Egypt, and Washington. It has not deterred Iran from undertaking destabilizing activities that—since the beginning of the Arab Spring—have exacerbated sectarian tensions, threatened U.S. allies, and increased its influence in the region. Nor did the large U.S. forward presence prevent the death of more than 250,000 Syrians—most of them at the hands of the Assad regime.

Finally, America's nuclear redline failed to assure allies or to halt Iran's nuclear program. President Obama repeatedly intimated that the United States would act to prevent Iran from building a nuclear weapon. Yet his failure to enforce the August 2012 Syrian chemical weapons redline and, as suggested previously, the use of passive language to convey the warning to Iran, raised questions about the credibility of this threat. Moreover, the redline effectively enabled Iran to become a nuclear-threshold state; its status as such was confirmed by the nuclear deal with the P5+1/EU, which also preserved Iran's breakout option. For U.S. regional partners, this is a game-changing development that has transformed Middle Eastern power dynamics to their detriment, and that is likely to spur, rather than stem nuclear proliferation. Indeed, Saudi Arabia has already vowed to match whatever nuclear infrastructure Iran is permitted to keep as part of the agreement.

## Assessment

Although it failed to foresee or forestall Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the United States scored a number of important deterrence successes in the Middle East over the past three decades: it prevented the Iran-Iraq War from escalating further; thwarted Iraqi military aggression against Saudi Arabia and Kuwait; and discouraged Iran from disrupting shipping in the Gulf. The United States has been less successful, however, in deterring Iranian terrorism and proxy warfare, Syrian chemical weapons use, and Iranian offensive cyber operations. And it has a mixed record employing the military instrument for purposes of compellence. There are several reasons both types of coercion have proven so challenging:

- ▣ Local actors may be highly motivated to engage in actions that advance their vital interests—actions a distant Great Power may not be equally motivated to prevent.

- ▣ Regional actors understand that the United States often cannot respond to certain types of challenges due to domestic, foreign, or legal constraints, or they may doubt U.S. commitment and resolve based on its past actions or their assessment of U.S. intentions.
- ▣ U.S. vulnerabilities may tempt adversaries to act because of the anticipated benefits, or because these vulnerabilities may deter a U.S. response.

For these reasons, some have questioned the utility of deterrence for anything other than preventing major conventional wars or nuclear strikes, and as a strategic organizing principle.<sup>128</sup> While this critique goes too far, it raises important questions about the limitations of deterrence that require further consideration.<sup>129</sup> This assessment should likewise temper expectations regarding the efficacy of coercive diplomacy, which nonetheless remains an important part of the U.S. policy toolkit.

Experience indicates that both kinds of coercion—deterrence or compellence—require a tailored approach that accounts for context, history, politics, and culture.<sup>130</sup> For instance:

- ▣ Threats may not have been understood as intended due to cultural barriers and divergent assessments of U.S. credibility and resolve.
- ▣ Subtle, implied threats that play on paranoia and conspiratorial thinking may be more effective than overt, direct threats that may cause an adversary to dig in its heels to save face.
- ▣ Effective measures may include asymmetric responses that target what the adversary truly values, render U.S. actions unpredictable, and raise the risks and costs of brinkmanship for the adversary.

Yet, there is still much to be learned about how regional adversaries assess U.S. threats, credibility, and capabilities, and how deterrence and compellence works in the Middle East,<sup>131</sup> especially in the cyber domain, where “rules of the road” have yet to be established.<sup>132</sup> This will be crucial in the event of a regional nuclear arms race, where the costs of a deterrence failure could be catastrophic.

Given the preoccupation of most Middle Eastern regimes with survival, the United States should also consider how it can exploit fears of coups, regime change, and “soft revolutions” for purposes of deterrence

and compellence.<sup>133</sup> For this reason, a credible covert-action capability could be a useful policy tool.

Finally, the United States needs to better understand how it is perceived by its friends in the region, and how to shape their expectations. America's ability to assure regional partners and allies has been undermined in the past fifteen years by the perception that it is neither particularly reliable nor competent. U.S. policies have adversely affected these states' security in ways that cannot be redressed by arms transfers, joint military exercises, or a large U.S. forward presence. U.S. efforts to assure them have failed to allay their doubts, assuage their fears, or address threats to their security.

In the Middle East, trust is built through personal relationships rather than through institutions or treaties. There is no substitute for presidential sweat equity in relationship building with regional leaders. And assessments of the mettle and character of the U.S. president and the mood of the American people are at least as important as perceptions of U.S. military power. (Most regional allies have only a rudimentary understanding of U.S. military capabilities anyhow.) Washington's inability to assure allies and partners is rooted in perceptions of U.S. credibility and competence, not capability.<sup>134</sup>

Thus, augmenting the capabilities of forward-deployed U.S. forces will not accomplish much unless parallel steps are taken to alter perceptions of U.S. resolve. And that can only be accomplished by a pattern of behavior that demonstrates, over time, sound judgment and constancy of purpose.

11.

## Enabling Others: Train/Equip and Security Force Assistance Missions

TRAIN AND EQUIP (T&E) and Security Force Assistance (SFA)<sup>135</sup> missions have always served as policy multipliers for the United States, which can claim a number of important past successes in this area:

- ▣ After North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950, the United States salvaged the scattered remnants of the Republic of Korea Army and, between 1950 and 1953, helped recruit, train, and equip a twenty-division army of 576,000.<sup>136</sup>
- ▣ Between 1981 and 1992, U.S. advisors oversaw a massive expansion of El Salvador's military, ensuring the survival of the Salvadoran government, overseeing a transition to democracy, and facilitating a negotiated end to the country's civil war.<sup>137</sup>
- ▣ During the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989), the United States ran a covert train-and-equip effort with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence directorate for the Afghan mujahedin, enabling the latter to inflict significant losses on Soviet forces and eventually oust them from Afghanistan.<sup>138</sup>
- ▣ Between 1995 and 1997, U.S. trainers helped establish a military balance between Bosnian Serb and Federation forces, purged Bosnia of foreign extremists, and strengthened Bosnian Federation institutions, consolidating the peace established by the Dayton Accords.<sup>139</sup>

A number of factors have been consistently associated with successful SFA efforts. Effective partners generally share U.S. vital security interests and

threat perceptions; a willingness to invest their own resources in building defense capacity; and sufficient absorptive capacity to benefit from U.S. assistance (e.g., a professional military, low levels of corruption, and stable governance). Likewise, successful SFA efforts are generally well resourced and consistently sustained over time; emphasize building partner-nation absorptive capacity—especially ministerial capacity; and are tailored to the absorptive capacity and objectives of the partner nation.<sup>140</sup>

In the past decade, the United States has undertaken a number of T&E and SFA missions in the Middle East, with decidedly mixed results, including a modest SFA effort for the Palestinian Authority security forces (PASF), covert and overt T&E programs for the Syrian opposition, and a massive SFA effort for the Iraqi security forces. Of these, only the first can thus far be deemed a qualified success.

## **Professionalizing the Palestinian Authority Security Forces**

The Office of the U.S. Security Coordinator (USSC) for Israel and the Palestinian territories was established in 2005 to assist in security-sector transformation and professionalization of the PASF, and to pave the way to a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The USSC provides training to select PASF organizations, including the Presidential Guard (PG), National Security Forces (NSF), and Civil Defense (CD) forces. Since its establishment, it has overseen the training of two PG battalions, nine NSF special battalions, and hundreds of CD personnel. An EU mission supports police reform, rule of law, and police-prosecution cooperation.<sup>141</sup>

The USSC works under major constraints: significant manpower and funding limitations; the need for Israeli approval for all equipment transfers and training for the PASF; the inability to operate in Gaza, where Hamas, the area's ruling authority, is hostile to its efforts; limits imposed by Palestinian politics—especially cronyism, clientelism, and corruption—on the pace and scope of PASF transformation and professionalization; the disjointed nature of the foreign-assistance delivery mechanism, which reinforces the fragmentation of the PASF; and the overarching political context, especially the absence of a credible Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which limits PASF development and poses an ever-present threat to the endeavor.<sup>142</sup>

Nonetheless, the USSC can claim a number of important achievements. The PASF has preserved security in the West Bank and continues security cooperation with the Israeli military, despite crises in Israeli-Palestinian relations and three wars in Gaza that have tested the force's cohesion and professionalism. Yet the Israeli military continues to operate intermittently in Area A of the West Bank, where the PASF is supposed to exercise exclusive security control, due to the Israeli government's belief that the PA lacks the political will to act against certain security threats. And absent a "political horizon," a third intifada could threaten the future of the USSC and PASF.

## **Training and Equipping the Syrian Opposition**

With the 2011 onset of the Syrian civil war, President Obama came under pressure from within and outside his administration to support the "moderate" opposition against the Assad regime. Rejecting the unanimous advice of his senior advisors in 2012 to initiate a significant, overt train-and-equip program for the opposition,<sup>143</sup> the president authorized a small CIA-led covert effort to train and equip moderate rebels to pressure the Assad regime and thereby facilitate a diplomatic solution to the conflict.<sup>144</sup> This effort reportedly entailed the transfer of small arms and ammunition, recoilless rifles, mortars, and TOW antitank guided missiles<sup>145</sup> and training for vetted opposition groups. However, it was plagued by problems; many of the groups were undisciplined, and allowed chaos to reign in areas they controlled, or included criminals who preyed on the areas' civilian population.<sup>146</sup> Many of these groups were, in turn, preyed upon by stronger Salafi-jihadist groups, which took a cut of any military assistance they received and often raided and looted their weapons stores.<sup>147</sup> And many such groups struck tactical alliances with larger, more cohesive and capable groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, often inadvertently advancing the interests of these more radical groups.<sup>148</sup>

Facing criticism over its handling of the Syria crisis, and frustrated with the CIA-led covert program, the Obama administration announced in June 2014 a \$500 million effort led by the U.S. military to train and equip five thousand oppositionists a year for three years.<sup>149</sup> However, problems with vetting recruits and a requirement that vetted person-

nel sign a statement committing themselves to fight the Islamic State and not the Assad regime hamstrung the effort, while a number of high-profile incidents involving the capture of newly trained personnel upon their arrival in Syria, and the theft of their equipment, raised questions about the program's efficacy. In the end, about seventy-five individuals were trained before the program was suspended in October 2015 with little to show for the effort.<sup>150</sup>

The dearth of reliable information in the public domain about both covert and overt efforts precludes a comprehensive assessment today of why they failed. But several factors likely contributed to this outcome:

- ▣ The U.S. failure to deliver on commitments (whether promised arms deliveries or the CW redline), the glacial pace of the T&E effort, and the limited nature of the assistance (especially the refusal to provide MANPADS), caused many rebel fighters to gravitate to better resourced and often more extreme groups.<sup>151</sup>
- ▣ The lack of strong U.S. leadership and support early on led a number of U.S. regional allies to funnel support to more extreme groups. (Here, the United States repeated a mistake it made in Afghanistan in the 1980s, when it allowed Pakistan to decide who got the U.S.-supplied weapons and to thereby shape the political complexion of the opposition.)<sup>152</sup>
- ▣ Because of inadequate vetting, many FSA-affiliated groups gained a bad reputation due to their involvement in criminal activities, alienating them from the local population and facilitating the rise of IS.<sup>153</sup>
- ▣ A disjointed aid-delivery effort reinforced the fragmentation of the moderate opposition, although efforts by sponsors to rationalize and better coordinate their efforts eventually enabled these groups to achieve a number of battlefield successes.<sup>154</sup>
- ▣ Overall U.S. policy in Syria and Iraq alienated many Sunnis, who felt Washington was not moved by Sunni suffering and was tacitly allied with Iran, the Assad regime's main ally. This led many to support Islamist and jihadist groups fighting the Assad regime.
- ▣ The requirement that overt train-and-equip recruits pledge to fight only IS hindered the program's success, given that nearly all these groups saw the Assad regime as the main enemy.<sup>155</sup>

Learning from these prior failures, the Obama administration recently initiated a new phase in its support for the Syrian opposition, supplying arms to established, successful opposition groups such as the Syrian Democratic Forces, an alliance that operates in eastern Syria and consists largely of Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) and associated Arab militias, and by embedding up to three hundred Special Forces soldiers to train, advise, and assist these groups to build on their recent successes.<sup>156</sup> It remains to be seen how this latest effort will fare.

## **Security Force Assistance in Iraq**

Following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the subsequent dismantling of the Iraqi army and security forces by order of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), rebuilding the Iraqi security forces (ISF) became a major U.S. mission and a key to the American exit strategy in Iraq.

In the next eight years, the United States spent nearly \$25 billion rebuilding the ISF. The initial CPA effort was hindered by poor planning, inadequate resourcing, and policy missteps that catalyzed the nascent Iraqi insurgency.<sup>157</sup> The effort was also hindered by an early decision to rapidly transition lead responsibility for Iraq's security to the ISF because the U.S. leadership in Iraq and at CENTCOM believed the American presence catalyzed resistance.<sup>158</sup> U.S. forces pulled back before the ISF was ready to assume responsibility for the country, effectively creating a vacuum that the insurgents filled.<sup>159</sup>

Subsequent U.S. efforts to rebuild the ISF were consistently hindered by an insurgency that grew faster than security forces could be generated, and that consistently exceeded the capabilities of overstretched U.S. forces. Nonetheless, efforts to build the ISF eventually gained momentum, and by the latter phases of the U.S. occupation, a significant number of Iraqi units could operate reasonably well on their own against the insurgent groups and militias that constituted the principal threat, although nearly all units remained dependent on U.S. logistical, intelligence, and fire support.<sup>160</sup>

Yet, as the United States labored to generate professional and effective ISF units, countervailing forces undermined this effort. Because large, capable security forces offered a potentially potent instrument of control for Iraq's civilian leadership, Iraqi politicians and parties vied for influence in the ISF by integrating party militia members into the forces

and assigning political cronies to senior ISF positions. Consequently, the makeup of the ISF came to reflect the increasingly sectarian character of the Iraqi government.<sup>161</sup>

Thus, by 2007, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki moved to exert control over the ISF by appointing political cronies to senior positions and creating a parallel chain of command that circumvented the general staff.<sup>162</sup> Furthermore, corruption became endemic; commanders milked their positions for profit, skimming a percentage of their soldiers' salaries, demanding bribes to approve leave requests, and adding ghost soldiers to their personnel roles so that commanders could pocket their salary.<sup>163</sup> After the U.S. departure, training more or less ceased.<sup>164</sup> By the time IS captured Mosul and most of northern Iraq in June 2014, the ISF had become a hollow force.<sup>165</sup>

American organizational dysfunction contributed to this outcome. Although SFA was supposedly the highest priority mission for U.S. forces in Iraq, it never received priority access to manpower and resources, while U.S. headquarters, Multinational Force–Iraq (MNF-I), did not compel its force-generating command, Multinational Security Transition Command–Iraq (MNSTC-I), to coordinate with its operational command, Multinational Corps–Iraq (MNC-I); as a result, the two often operated at cross-purposes, at least until mid-2007. For instance, MNSTC-I's prioritization of training and equipping Iraqi units did not reflect the geographic priorities of MNC-I's counterinsurgency campaign.<sup>166</sup> And the United States focused on creating a force in its own image rather than a force reflecting local traditions or optimized for local conditions.

Mosul's fall in June 2014 opened yet another chapter in SFA to Iraq. The Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF), approved by Congress in November 2014, appropriated \$1.6 million to rebuild ISF capabilities to conduct offensive operations to retake IS-held territory. It provided resources for nine Iraqi army brigades (three divisions), three Kurdish brigades, and an initial tribal force to serve as the basis for an Iraqi National Guard.<sup>167</sup> Equipment acquired through this program did not start arriving until June 2015.<sup>168</sup>

The United States also sent an initial contingent of 3,550 troops to Iraq to train, advise, and assist the new Iraqi units called for under the ITEF—although the actual number of U.S. troops is reportedly approaching 5,000.<sup>169</sup> The 7,000 recruits provided by the Iraqi govern-

ment, however, fell far short of planned numbers (24,000 by autumn 2015).<sup>170</sup> And while a small ISF force, augmented by large numbers of Shiite militiamen, succeeded in retaking Tikrit from IS in April 2015, an IS counteroffensive took Ramadi from the ISF in May 2015. Most of Ramadi was retaken by the ISF in December 2015. And while shaping operations for the battle of Mosul have already begun, the counteroffensive to retake the city is not likely to start before late 2016 or early 2017.<sup>171</sup>

While the United States can point to a number of SFA successes in Iraq—especially the training of the Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) and a number of other units—its broader failures should raise searching questions about the U.S. approach to SFA there. Many of the challenges the ISF faces are political and can only be fixed by Iraqis. If Iraqi politics, weak leadership (political and military), and the malign influence of neighbors like Iran preclude the creation of a professional military free of corruption and sectarianism, there is not much Washington can do to help. And if the Iraqi government continues with a zero-sum, winner-take-all approach to politics, rather than one that emphasizes inclusion and compromise, it will only succeed in intensifying or regenerating Sunni opposition.<sup>172</sup> Courageous, visionary civilian leadership will be needed to transform Iraq's political culture and to buck those with a vested interest in the current ethno-sectarian spoils system.

Most U.S. lessons-learned documents about the SFA effort in Iraq focus on SFA mechanics, or its bureaucratic and programmatic aspects: the importance of relationship building,<sup>173</sup> mentoring and role modeling,<sup>174</sup> the need for a dedicated Army Advisor Corps to conduct SFA,<sup>175</sup> and problems related to equipment inventory and program management.<sup>176</sup> It is remarkable how little attention is devoted to the challenges of building cohesive, motivated units and capable national security institutions, and of growing effective leaders in the Iraqi cultural and political milieu.

In his semiautobiographical memoir of the 1916–1918 Arab revolt, T. E. Lawrence devoted considerable attention to many of these matters, and offered astute insights into the motivation of Bedouin fighters, the challenges posed by their tribal rivalries, the nature of leadership in Bedouin society, and the differences between Arab fighters of Bedouin and urban background.<sup>177</sup> Perhaps it is understandable that U.S. military personnel—products of a system in which individual service members are treated as interchangeable cogs—would not adopt a tailored approach to

training Iraqi personnel and units. Yet, while the U.S. military has applied cultural knowledge to the mechanics and programmatic aspects of the SFA relationship, no evidence suggests it has done so with regard to creating effective combat units or capable national security institutions.

The implicit subtext of much of the lessons-learned literature is that Iraqi soldiers need to become more like Americans, and not that the United States needs to tailor its approach to its partner's cultural predilections and operational requirements—although signs suggest that regarding the latter, things are changing.<sup>178</sup> Efforts to build Arab militaries that fight like the U.S. military will generally not succeed because they will require Arab militaries to operate in ways contrary to deep-rooted and culturally grounded habits and norms.<sup>179</sup>

Conventional Arab armies have often failed at maneuver warfare because tactical leaders were inflexible, did not show initiative, and were unwilling to report bad news. These tendencies are rooted in aspects of Arab culture such as: deference to group norms and authority; a reliance on rote learning and “school solutions,” rather than critical reasoning skills; and a preoccupation with saving face, which often results in the suppression of unpalatable facts.<sup>180</sup> Likewise, logistics organizations tend to hoard equipment and supplies, since their release to units in need would render inventories unavailable for more urgent contingencies, and would require restocking by supply officers—with the attendant uncertainty of whether requests would be filled by an often corrupt or unresponsive supply system.<sup>181</sup>

Thus, the U.S. military should not try to remake Arab militaries in its own image—that is, as a force with a strong NCO/junior officer corps capable of operating with minimal guidance and improvising as needed in response to battlefield developments. The local culture is generally not conducive to such modes of operation.<sup>182</sup>

Rather, U.S. SFA efforts in Iraq, and elsewhere in the region, are more likely to succeed if grounded in culturally appropriate approaches to team building, leadership, and military operations. The United States should learn from successful Arab armies—Egypt in the 1973 war with Israel, Iraq in the latter phases of its 1980–1988 war with Iran, and even IS—that developed work-arounds for persistent shortcomings exhibited by conventional Arab armies, and adapted foreign concepts and practices to their particular needs.<sup>183</sup>

Egypt and Iraq arrived at similar solutions to these cultural challenges. They conducted heavily scripted set-piece operations that obviated initiative, improvisation, or the coordination of combined arms. They also carried out exhaustive rehearsals on detailed mock-ups of objectives. Each soldier had only one task, which he learned to perform by rote. In addition to detailed planning and extensive scripting, both armies relied on massive artillery fires and vast numerical superiority at the point of decision to prevail on the battlefield.<sup>184</sup>

Such considerations should guide future U.S. SFA efforts with the ISF, which should focus on ensuring ISF proficiency in mission-essential tasks to counter IS tactics. This would include exhaustive rehearsals of

- ▣ assaults on strongpoints and built-up areas, followed by rapid consolidation of captured positions in preparation for IS counterattacks;
- ▣ IED clearance and counter-SVBIED drills;<sup>185</sup>
- ▣ protective fires along likely avenues of approach for IS counterattacks;
- ▣ resupply of units following seizure of an objective to assuage fears of logistical abandonment;
- ▣ commitment of mobile reserves to break up IS counterattacks and interdict IS reinforcements; and
- ▣ mobility and countermobility drills for organic/attached engineering units to preserve the momentum of attacks.

Nevertheless, Washington should not exclude the possibility of creating a small number of highly capable units that can fight like Americans. Iraq's ISOF units are capable of doing so,<sup>186</sup> as are other elite Arab units—such as Jordanian and Emirati special forces as well as the UAE's F-16 pilots. But achieving such standards may not be possible for the majority of units in many Arab militaries.

## **Assessment**

The three cases examined here—the PASF, Syrian opposition, and Iraqi Security Forces—demonstrate that politics often plays a decisive

role in determining the outcome of train-and-equip and SFA missions. Military-assistance efforts will often need to be coupled with parallel diplomatic efforts to shape the political environment and ensure that conditions are conducive to success—especially in deeply divided societies like Iraq—and to prevent military and security forces from becoming politicized. Even the most lavishly resourced SFA efforts are unlikely to succeed without culturally and operationally appropriate approaches, though much more thought needs to be devoted to this matter. And unless recipient states create a political culture of inclusiveness and compromise, counterinsurgency campaigns are apt to be waged in ways that ensure the perpetuation of the very problems they aim to resolve.<sup>187</sup>

12.

## Information Activities

IT HAS BEEN said that the United States has a “way of battle” but not a “way of war” because of America’s frequent failure to translate military victories into sustainable political outcomes, or to connect its battlefield activities to a higher strategic purpose.<sup>188</sup> This pattern is especially evident in the U.S. campaign against the Islamic State, in which it has failed to effectively leverage the lethal effects of its military operations to create decisive nonlethal effects in the psychological and informational domains.

Information activities are the decisive line of effort for many U.S. regional adversaries and are woven into nearly all their activities. IS, al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and Iran, for instance, engage in incessant efforts to undermine the image, credibility, and stature of their enemies, and their military activities are often undertaken as much to achieve an informational and psychological advantage—to enhance their stature, gain supporters, and intimidate and demoralize their enemies—as to achieve battlefield gains.<sup>189</sup> Thus, whereas the United States generally undertakes information activities to support its military operations, its adversaries frequently undertake military activities, whether shows of force or lethal operations, to advance their propaganda and information warfare aims.<sup>190</sup>

Information activities have been critical to the success of America’s adversaries, and should therefore be central to the U.S. response and to its regional strategy.<sup>191</sup> At present, they are not; their placement as the sixth of nine “lines of effort” in the U.S. counter-IS strategy is probably

a reasonable indicator of relative weighting in the U.S. campaign plan. The comparatively limited resources devoted to information activities—though growing—is another.<sup>192</sup> Moreover, the military should be seen as an enabler to shape the psychological environment and achieve informational effects to undermine the appeal of its terrorist adversaries in particular—ensuring that their battlefield defeat sets conditions for their ultimate defeat in the informational and virtual domains.

Information activities—the use of words, actions, and emotive images to sway foreign audiences and to undermine the appeal of enemies—is the greatest untapped source of U.S. leverage in the Middle East.<sup>193</sup> In assessing its enemies' ability to harm American interests, U.S. policymakers tend to focus on hard power, especially the conventional and unconventional military capabilities of its adversaries. They tend to discount the importance of propaganda and information warfare. And even when they have recognized its importance, as in the struggle against IS and al-Qaeda, U.S. efforts have often been clumsy and underresourced.<sup>194</sup>

The centrality of propaganda to the Middle Eastern “way of war” has deep historical roots.<sup>195</sup> And because rhetorical and emotional appeals, as well as paranoia, rumormongering, and conspiratorial thinking, are central to the practice of politics in much of the region, many Middle Eastern peoples are particularly susceptible to psychological and information operations.<sup>196</sup> For these reasons, psychological and information warfare should play a much greater role in the campaigns against IS and al-Qaeda, America's strategic competition with the Islamic Republic of Iran, and in countering other threats emanating from the region.

Countering adversary information activities does not simply mean, however, responding “in kind.” The United States does not necessarily need to do what its adversaries are doing on Twitter or in the media, only “more and better”—although this should certainly be part of the U.S. response. Rather, the United States should speak primarily through its actions. It has often been said that strategic communication is 20 percent words and 80 percent actions; and while actions speak louder than words, words can amplify the impact of actions. At any rate, words and actions must reinforce rather than undermine each other. The yawning gap between word and action in U.S. policy (exemplified by the scant support for Syrian rebels seeking President Assad's removal, vows to “destroy” IS with an underresourced military campaign, and unfulfilled

pledges to push back against Iranian regional activities), is perhaps the greatest information challenge facing America in the Middle East.

## The Campaign against IS

Information activities have played a central role in the Islamic State's success.<sup>197</sup> For this reason, countering its information activities must be a central element of the anti-IS campaign.

Efforts to delegitimize IS on religious grounds by demonstrating how its words and actions contradict Islam's tenets—initially the main thrust of U.S. efforts to discredit IS—may influence some potential recruits but are unlikely to affect the overwhelming majority of its followers, who reject the legitimacy and authority of establishment clerics.<sup>198</sup> Accordingly, this should not be the centerpiece of coalition information activities. Likewise, publicizing the stories of disillusioned and repentant former IS true believers may influence some potential recruits, but the effectiveness of such efforts is likely to be limited, as such witnesses can be dismissed as malcontents, or agents of foreign intelligence services.

An asymmetric approach to countering IS's appeal may be more successful. Whatever its theological claims, IS—and groups like it—cares primarily about wielding power and achieving worldly success. Because so much of IS's appeal derives from its aura of military invincibility and the existence of its utopian political project—the “caliphate”—defeating its army and dismantling its “Islamic state” are key to undermining its appeal, discrediting its ideology, and demolishing its brand. The defeat of IS would puncture its aura of military invincibility, and would mark an end to the caliphate and the Islamic utopia it purports to represent, as well as opportunities to seek glory and adventure, to dominate others, to gain spoils of war, and to acquire sex slaves—the things that have drawn so many to embrace its cause.

Indeed, the nonlethal effects of the coalition military campaign could have a decisive impact—on IS's appeal and on America's ability to shape the broader campaign against the jihadist group by bringing allies along, overshadowing Russian and Iranian achievements against IS, and inspiring anti-IS uprisings in areas it now controls. Yet the military and information campaigns the U.S. government is waging against IS seem to be separate activities conducted by stovepiped bureaucracies that rarely communicate with each other, rather than elements of a whole-of-gov-

ernment approach that leverages military activities to achieve psychological and informational effects.

Moreover, IS has found ways to create the impression that it still is “remaining and expanding,” even when its progress in Iraq and Syria has been stymied, by gaining new foreign franchises (in Nigeria, Sinai, Libya, and Afghanistan) and ordering or inspiring attacks overseas (Brussels, Paris, and San Bernardino). Countering this perception of momentum will likely prove difficult.

IS’s defeat is unlikely to end the jihadist ideology it embodies. While the United States may succeed in discrediting the IS brand, al-Qaeda will still be a major force to be reckoned with, and the jihadist ideology that inspires it will live on. Remnants of IS and groups animated by some variant of the ideology that drives IS or al-Qaeda will be around for years to come.

Indeed, expunging the violent jihadist strain in contemporary Islam goes beyond defeating IS or achieving good governance in countries where Muslims reside—because violent extremism is a problem in Muslim communities located even in well-ordered societies. Rather, it is a “sociology of ideas” problem: What accounts for the rise and fall of extreme political and religious ideologies? The answer to this question will be key to undermining the appeal of these ideologies, and should be the focus of further research.

## Countering Iran’s Influence

Iran engages in incessant propaganda and spin to burnish its reputation at home and abroad, and to discredit the United States. Tehran presents itself as a dependable partner and formidable adversary, and pushes a triumphalist narrative that asserts Iran is a rising power with God and history on its side, and that its doctrine of “resistance”—the idea underpinning the so-called axis of resistance—is a formula for defeating the United States and its allies. Iran’s recent successes in extending its influence in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have enhanced its image and standing in the region among its supporters, while unnerving its adversaries.<sup>199</sup>

Iran’s spin has often been undercut, however, by its own political and economic problems and by Iranian officials’ tendency to issue vain and provocative boasts, to meddle in their neighbors’ affairs, to overpromise

and underdeliver on aid commitments, and to lecture and condescend toward others, particularly Arabs.

Tehran also seeks to ensure the primacy of its brand of revolutionary Islam in Shiite communities around the world by spending large sums of money to support the activities of clerics trained in Qom and steeped in the ideology of clerical rule (*velayat-e faqih*), by providing scholarships for Shiites to study religion in Iran, where some are recruited by Iran's intelligence services, and by coopting or displacing clerics trained elsewhere (e.g., Najaf).

The United States could counter Iran's information activities by more actively challenging its narrative; discrediting the "resistance doctrine" by ensuring the defeat of its militia proxies; and highlighting the price the Iranian people have paid for Iran's support for radical movements and the Assad regime in Syria. It should exploit Tehran's overreach to make the regime look foolish and incompetent in the eyes of its people, and the peoples of the region. And it should discourage countries around the world from allowing their citizens to travel to Iran for religious studies, where they may be radicalized and recruited by Iranian intelligence.

Because the Islamic Republic's leadership came to power through revolution, survival remains its foremost concern and counterrevolution its greatest fear. As noted earlier, Iran's leaders believe U.S. "soft warfare"—perceived efforts to inculcate foreign ideas, values, and ideologies in order to undermine the Islamic Republic—is a greater threat to the regime's survival than a foreign military strike or invasion.

This is a fear the United States should use to pressure Tehran and bolster deterrence. To do so, the United States needs to revive its ability to wage political warfare—including inform-and-influence activities, economic warfare, and covert action to destabilize hostile states such as the Islamic Republic.<sup>200</sup> The threat of soft or political warfare could be one of the most effective instruments in the U.S. policy toolkit when dealing with countries such as Iran.

Reinvigorating political warfare, however, is easier said than done. America's capabilities in this domain have atrophied since the Cold War. Skills have to be relearned and capabilities reestablished. And it is easy to do much harm by crude or maladroit influence activities, or amateurish or bungled covert operations.

Moreover, most of America's soft power resides in the private sec-

tor—its popular and consumer culture, Hollywood, its information technology sector, and its higher education system—and cannot be effectively mobilized by the U.S. government as a foreign policy instrument. Yet to the degree that the United States seeks to promote its values and advance its interests by expanding contacts between peoples, fostering the free exchange of ideas and information, and opening markets to American cultural and commercial products, it helps facilitate the flow of information and ideas to Iran.<sup>201</sup>

To this end, the United States should more actively encourage the private sector to build bridges with Iranian civil society. In many cases, private organizations already have missions that would serve U.S. purposes: news outlets want to get information out; universities want to encourage contact, scholarly exchange, and debate; entertainment companies want to provide types of music and images that the people want but the regime hates. On this count, the U.S. government is already encouraging the private sector to help Iranians circumvent limits on their ability to get news and communicate with one another, but it should do more.<sup>202</sup>

Undoubtedly, there will be objections to anything that smacks of meddling in Iran's internal affairs and engaging in activities even remotely resembling the Anglo-American coup in 1953 to remove Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq. Indeed, some studies of coercive diplomacy underscore the counterproductive nature of threatening regime change on achieving positive outcomes.<sup>203</sup> While such concerns are justified, quietly keeping such an option in reserve, to be used in extremis if long-term efforts to change Iran's policies fail, might help reconcile these seemingly incompatible objectives.

## Assessment

During the Cold War, Washington often used the informational instrument of national power in a sophisticated manner, but this capability has long since atrophied.<sup>204</sup> Despite progress since the September 11 attacks, the U.S. government still faces significant bureaucratic, cultural, and political obstacles to success. Information activities have long been hampered by skepticism regarding their efficacy, or at least the efficacy of U.S.-led efforts vis-à-vis extremist Islam, differences over how such efforts should be conducted, concerns that covert or clandestine efforts could undermine U.S. public diplomacy, and a cumbersome, and often

incoherent, interagency process. America's information activities have often been as disjointed as other elements of its strategy.

Furthermore, U.S. government efforts in this area tend to more closely reflect American perceptions, preconceptions, and political imperatives than current Middle Eastern realities. Deep knowledge and understanding of foreign cultures and societies are essential to success here. The United States needs to devote more resources to this effort, mobilize all means at the government's disposal—overt, covert, and clandestine—in support of these activities, remove bureaucratic obstacles to effective interagency cooperation, and, in the campaigns against jihadist groups such as IS and al-Qaeda, more effectively leverage military operations to achieve psychological and informational effects.

Countering adversary information activities does not necessarily mean one-upping adversaries by flooding social media with tweets—doing what IS and similar groups are doing, only better.<sup>205</sup> Asymmetric responses may sometimes be more effective, whether undermining IS's appeal through its military defeat or undermining Iran's appeal by indirectly enabling Iranian critics of the Islamic Republic. That said, the United States still needs to enable individuals working to counter the online social media activities of groups like IS and al-Qaeda, as well as states like Iran. For while the State Department employs no more than twenty or so people working social media to counter violent extremist groups, the number of citizens worldwide waging their own private wars against extremist groups online probably numbers in the millions. The U.S. government must do more to empower people who are fighting America's enemies in the virtual arena.<sup>206</sup>

## Conclusion:

# New Ways of War for an Era of Complex Protracted Conflict

THE UNITED STATES faces unprecedented military challenges in the Greater Middle East. It is waging military campaigns against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and against a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan, while conducting parallel counterterrorism campaigns against transnational terrorist networks associated with IS and al-Qaeda in much of the region and beyond. And Washington is now weighing military options against IS in Libya.

The sectarian proxy war between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and their allies and Russia's military intervention in Syria greatly complicate the aforementioned campaigns and efforts to contain spillover from Syria's civil war. Moreover, America's reduced role in the region today has diminished its stature and created an opening for expanded Russian influence. While the ultimate impact of the nuclear deal with Iran will become clear in time, in the near term sanctions relief will almost certainly provide Iran with greater resources to undertake destabilizing regional activities, while in the long term the deal will allow the Islamic Republic to develop the wherewithal for a nuclear breakout.<sup>207</sup>

The worst, however, may be yet to come. Low oil prices, mass refugee flows—which will surge again if widespread fighting resumes in Syria—and sectarian violence could eventually undermine the stability of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, the Kurdistan region of Iraq, and the Gulf Cooperation Council states. And Russian military intervention in Syria has contributed to mass refugee flows to Europe—what some have called the “weaponization” of refugees—a development that may strengthen the nationalist right in Europe and bolster parties that tend to favor closer ties to Russia over the United States.<sup>208</sup>

## Do No (More) Harm

No matter how bad things are in the Middle East, they can always get worse—and often do. The future depends, in part, on how Washington responds to the region's crises. Thus far, Washington has unwittingly contributed to regional destabilization through various sins of commission and omission that have reinforced deeply rooted pathologies, exacerbated existing conflicts, undermined friends, and empowered adversaries.

It is not clear that senior U.S. decisionmakers understand the profoundly destabilizing impact of some U.S. policies, apart from the 2003 invasion of Iraq, or see the connection between past American actions and many of the challenges the United States now faces in the region. American errors in Iraq, Libya, and now Syria have had systemic, region-wide consequences, spurring tectonic shifts in political and conflict dynamics that have proven exceedingly difficult to manage. By contrast, targeted counterterrorist strikes throughout the region and precision air campaigns in Syria and Iraq have generally produced effects local in scope and limited in duration. Tactical virtuosity, high-tech wizardry, and arms sales cannot offset blunders whose impacts are geopolitical. The beginning of wisdom is to recognize this—and to do no (more) harm.

## Strike the Right Balance

This is not to say that the United States should disengage from the Middle East because the region's problems are insoluble or because it risks getting drawn into a "quagmire." The U.S. experience in Iraq shows the pitfalls of both reckless intervention *and* precipitous disengagement: while the 2003 invasion destabilized the region, the U.S. withdrawal in 2011 and its subsequent disengagement, at least until June 2014, removed what had by then become a stabilizing factor, emboldening those bent on mayhem.

Recent history shows that what happens in the Middle East doesn't stay in the Middle East; developments there have far-reaching implications for the stability of Europe, Africa, Asia, and the security of the U.S. homeland. Middle Eastern oil remains critical to the world economy, while the region is the main incubator of jihadist ideology and training

ground for jihadist fighters. Moreover, political, demographic, and economic trends ensure the Middle East will be a major driver of international instability in the coming decades. Future administrations need to learn the lesson the Obama administration and previous administrations have learned the hard way: “If you don’t visit the Middle East, the Middle East will visit you.”

For this reason, the United States needs to remain militarily engaged in the region—to shape and influence developments there and to bolster or backstop American diplomacy. But it must do so in a sustainable fashion: at a level that it can afford, that will not undermine domestic political support for a long-term regional role, and that will enable it to deal with emerging threats elsewhere in the world.

Correspondingly, the solution to the problems of the Middle East is not another major U.S. ground operation there. After Iraq and Afghanistan, the American people are unlikely to support such a deployment, and even if they did, and the United States were willing to put 50,000 service members on the ground to defeat IS and dismantle its state, the conflict would likely morph into another grueling counterinsurgency fight, with outmatched adversaries going to ground to return as insurgents, as they did previously in Iraq and Afghanistan. Population-centric counterinsurgency campaigns are manpower and resource intensive, time consuming, and often yield ambiguous outcomes that can be sustained only with the continued investment of significant diplomatic capital and a long-term military presence.<sup>209</sup> The resources required, moreover, could limit America’s ability to respond to military challenges elsewhere, thereby undermining the credibility of commitments in other parts of the world.<sup>210</sup> Most important, without a change in the host nation’s politics, the impact of even successful counterinsurgency campaigns could be short-lived, necessitating a return of U.S. forces within a few years to deal with the problem anew.<sup>211</sup> The United States needs to retain the capability to conduct counterinsurgency operations, but it should commit to such operations only as a last resort.<sup>212</sup>

Neither is “offshore balancing” the solution—that is, relying on local allies to keep the peace, with the United States intervening only when absolutely necessary.<sup>213</sup> Offshore balancing works best in regions comprised of strong states that can balance each other and be balanced. The Middle East today is characterized by the proliferation of failed and failing states as well as state and nonstate actors engaged in terrorist,

proxy, and low-level conventional conflicts—the types of conflict most difficult to deter by balancing strategies. Moreover, many U.S. regional partners and allies are too weak militarily to take on the kind of active role envisioned by proponents of offshore balancing. Finally, experience has shown that without strong American leadership, regional allies will often act in ways that undermine regional stability and U.S. interests. While the United States needs to find a better way to remain engaged militarily, offshore balancing is not the answer.

The challenge, then, is to fashion a “light footprint”<sup>214</sup> approach for the Middle East that is nonetheless robust enough to generate and sustain momentum against groups like IS and al-Qaeda, deter adversaries like Iran, bring along allies and partners, and bolster or backstop diplomacy, but without a major investment of American blood and treasure.<sup>215</sup> To do so, the United States will sometimes need to “lead from the front” and put its own boots on the ground—although not so many that it provokes a destabilizing anti-American backlash or enables its partners to watch from the sidelines. And when vital U.S. interests are not at stake, “leading from behind” may be a viable option. But time is not on America’s side: the longer uprooting IS takes, the longer the group will have to indoctrinate a new generation of jihadists in areas it controls. Likewise, the prolongation of the Syrian civil war will only create new recruiting opportunities for groups such as IS and Jabhat al-Nusra.

## **The Way Ahead**

There are no technological fixes or panaceas to the policy and strategy challenges the United States faces in the Middle East.<sup>216</sup> Rather, improving U.S. strategic competence will require changes in how the U.S. thinks, how the U.S. government is organized, and how the U.S. military operates in the region. This will require: (1) a deeper understanding of the operational environment; (2) institutional reforms to improve strategic performance; and (3) rethinking its approach to a number of critical national security tasks, including: counterterrorism; deterrence, compellence, and assurance; security force assistance; information operations; and covert action.

If the United States fails to make these changes, no matter what kind of technological and doctrinal advantages conferred by the Defense Department’s “third offset strategy,”<sup>217</sup> the “strongest military the world

has ever known,” as President Obama has called it,<sup>218</sup> will continue underperforming in a part of the world that remains vital to U.S. interests.

**BETTER UNDERSTAND THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT TO INFLUENCE AND SHAPE IT.** In a region whose politics are characterized by extraordinary complexity, even the most experienced policymakers will make mistakes, and will be challenged to craft policies not beset by difficult dilemmas, and impossible contradictions. For instance:

- ▣ Washington’s efforts to be on “the right side of history” by supporting the January 2011 overthrow of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak failed to garner Egyptian goodwill and alienated Israeli and Gulf Arab allies, who saw this as a betrayal of an old and trusted ally.
- ▣ Washington’s outreach to Iran, its efforts to avoid getting drawn into Syria’s civil war and back into Iraq, and its initial strikes in Iraq to save Yazidis, Turkmen, and Kurds—anybody but Sunni Arabs—catalyzed the growth of IS and other jihadist groups.
- ▣ American inaction in Syria influenced several of its allies—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, in particular—to support radical Islamists, strengthening the extremists within the Syrian opposition.
- ▣ U.S. support for the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, though critical to the campaign against IS, complicates efforts to garner Turkish, and Arab support in eastern Syria, as both see Kurdish aspirations as a threat.
- ▣ The July 2015 nuclear deal with Iran may temporarily contain its nuclear program, but at the price of enabling its destabilizing regional policies, further energizing IS’s base, and confirming the latter’s claim that Washington is tacitly allied with Tehran.

Yet a Great Power that aspires to remain one has no right to make as many errors as the United States has in the Middle East since 9/11. A deeper understanding of the region’s politics and conflict dynamics is the key to reducing missteps and advancing U.S. interests there. Paradoxically, self-knowledge is the first step toward such an understanding.

**KNOW ONESELF TO KNOW “THE OTHER.”** The frequent U.S. habit of misreading the Middle East is rooted, in part, in an ingrained tendency to project American values and preferences onto others; to see the region as one imagines it, rather than as it is; and to believe that every problem has a solution, and that every adversary is a potential partner (think President Bill Clinton, the PLO and Syria; President Bush and Iraq; President Obama and Iran). While the transformation of Egypt in the 1970s from Soviet client to U.S. ally shows that such geopolitical reversals are possible, subsequent events demonstrate how exceedingly rare they are.

Given the current state of the Middle East, Washington should abandon hopes of “stabilizing” the region, “solving” its problems, or achieving sustainable “end states,” at least for the foreseeable future. For now, the best the United States can hope for is to shape and influence developments—disrupting and mitigating threats emanating from the region, while building on positive trends where possible. To do so, however, it will need a new vocabulary and new mental models to frame the challenges it faces.

**CREATE NEW VOCABULARY FOR NEW “WAYS OF WAR.”** The U.S. military lacks a vocabulary to describe the challenges it currently faces in the Middle East. Conventional interstate conflict is the paradigm that for decades has shaped U.S. thinking about war and the vocabulary used to discuss it; to a great extent, it still does. Yet most of the region’s conflicts today can be defined as “gray zone,” irregular, “hybrid,” or limited conventional conflicts involving state and nonstate actors.<sup>219</sup> To succeed in these kinds of conflicts, the United States needs a different vocabulary, and correspondingly to think, organize, and act differently.<sup>220</sup>

Thus, while President Obama has vowed to “degrade, and ultimately destroy,” IS,<sup>221</sup> it is not clear what it means to “destroy” an organization that operates as a dispersed or distributed network with affiliates throughout the Middle East, and that wages “decentralized jihad.”<sup>222</sup> Neither is it clear that one can speak about “decisive operations” in the context of a protracted conflict likely to last years, if not decades;<sup>223</sup> about “end states” in an era of rapid, disruptive sociopolitical change;<sup>224</sup> or about an “exit strategy” for a conflict with no end in sight. Finally, it is not clear that the term “victory” is relevant in the current context,<sup>225</sup> as it lends a military cast to conflicts that the United States would prefer

be managed or resolved in the political arena—though military pressure may set the conditions for political or diplomatic progress.

Rather, U.S. decisionmakers should think in terms of influencing and shaping the Middle East's long-term competitions, proxy wars, and protracted conflicts in order to advance its interests. This will require the United States to “balance, intervene, or abstain” as its interests dictate.<sup>226</sup> What would this mean in practice? And how can the United States succeed in this environment?

First, the United States needs to retain the ability to deal with traditional threats through counterproliferation strikes, conventional air-sea and air-land campaigns, and counterinsurgency operations. These traditional threats have not disappeared, and the United States must preserve its traditional competencies and overwhelming advantages in these areas.

The United States also needs to operate at variance with its preferred way of war—which has traditionally involved the rapid destruction of the enemy at minimal cost through high-tech firepower and overwhelming force. (The American way of war has also been characterized by closer focus on the fighting than on follow-through—with the result that it has often failed to leverage battlefield victories to advance its policy aims.) The United States will likewise have to break with its binary way of thinking about “war and peace,” “victory and defeat,” and “regular and irregular” conflicts in an era of protracted gray zone and hybrid conflicts.<sup>227</sup>

Further, the United States will need to prevail against adversaries that may be nonstate actors (e.g., Hezbollah) equipped with high-end conventional capabilities; state-like entities (e.g., IS) that meld terrorism, insurgency, and low-tech conventional military operations in “high art” hybrid campaigns extending over several continents; and states (e.g., Iran) that employ transnational proxy militias, conventional forces that use unconventional tactics (e.g., the IRGC's guerrilla navy), and large missile forces armed with conventional, and perhaps nonconventional warheads.

Some of these adversaries, like Iran, rely on incrementalism, ambiguity, and proxy warfare to stymie the use of conventional military power.<sup>228</sup> Others, like IS, rely on aggressive forms of hybrid warfare to which the United States and its allies have needed to adapt.<sup>229</sup> Most of these adversaries simultaneously employ information activities, terror-

ism, irregular and conventional forces, and criminal activities in hybrid campaigns to attain political and military objectives.

The United States will often need to think, organize, and fight more like its adversaries, working “by, with, and through” partners and proxies when such a path serves its interests; more effectively integrating the various elements of its national power;<sup>230</sup> and viewing military operations as a means of creating decisive psychological and informational effects. And it will need to maneuver more adeptly in a region increasingly characterized by political and geographic fragmentation, multi-sided proxy conflicts, and ambiguity caused by the blurring of boundaries between friends and enemies, war and peace, and conventional and irregular conflicts.

To achieve these ends, the United States will need to internalize the ad hoc adjustments to its traditional way of war made since launching its anti-IS campaign in August 2014. This means:

- ▣ Prioritizing support for states or entities that are threatened by IS or Iranian subversion. (This would mean, for instance, bolstering Jordan and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq.) But it would preclude an alliance with Syria, which is allied with Iran and has quietly abetted IS—though neither should the United States actively pursue Assad’s demise until a viable alternative to his rule has emerged.
- ▣ Partnering with nonstate actors, such as the Syrian Kurdish PYD, that can hold ground, govern in a manner acceptable to the local population, and combat extremist groups like IS and al-Qaeda in order to prevent ungoverned space from falling into the hands of such groups.<sup>231</sup>
- ▣ Working against further fragmentation by pursuing sustainable political arrangements between local actors aligned with U.S. interests in order to avoid infighting that can be exploited by extremist groups and hostile states.

And it would mean continuing the longstanding U.S. policy of preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon, especially one like Iran, that seeks to destabilize the region’s states in order to expand its influence via nonstate proxies.

The demands of dealing with many of the aforementioned challenges

run counter to attitudes and habits deeply ingrained in the American psyche. Americans prefer short wars that produce clear-cut results; they are uncomfortable with ambiguity and seemingly intractable conflicts. And while the American public may tolerate U.S. involvement in “long wars” in places where the media rarely ventures, like in Somalia, Yemen, and western Pakistan, waging a long war in the heart of the Middle East, under intense media scrutiny, may not be politically possible. Yet neither can the United States tolerate a radical “caliphate” in the heart of the Middle East that has inspired the largest jihadist mobilization yet seen—and that threatens allies in the region and in Europe—nor can it abide a nuclear-armed Iran in a Middle East enmeshed in sectarian proxy warfare.

## Case Study: The Counter-IS Campaign

How might the United States implement such an approach in its counter-IS campaign? To defeat IS’s military and dismantle its “Islamic state,” the United States will need to exploit the group’s vulnerabilities and sharpen the contradictions inherent in IS rule. This will require intensified action along military, economic, and psychological lines of effort to create synergies capable of producing decisive results: military operations should attrite IS’s combat power, hit symbolic and substantive targets associated with the group’s rule (e.g., key leaders), and pressure IS simultaneously in Iraq and Syria—to overextend IS and render it vulnerable to internal uprisings and external attack.

Specifically, the United States should intensify efforts to disrupt IS’s oil-production and smuggling activities to choke off its revenue stream and resources available for public services, governance, and economic activities. One aim of such actions would be to stir discontent and unrest in areas it controls. Disrupting the criminal activities that have traditionally been the group’s main source of income will, however, be much harder.

The United States should likewise strive to transform the psychological environment in Iraq and Syria by creating the perception, mainly through military means, that IS’s days are numbered. Such an effort may induce less-committed supporters or members to defect or turn on the group; deter prospective foreign fighters from joining it; and embolden subject populations to rise up against its overstretched forces.<sup>232</sup> This argues for an “anaconda strategy” that slowly, methodically squeezes IS

from all directions, in both Iraq and Syria, and along multiple lines of operation, rather than the kind of rapid, decisive operations the United States aspired to carry out in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.<sup>233</sup>

Indeed, the U.S. counter-IS campaign plan appears to incorporate many of these elements, although it does not seem to have integrated them coherently or nested the military campaign in a supporting regional strategy. In fact, U.S. regional policy has undermined the counter-IS campaign by eschewing a serious train-and-equip effort for the Syrian opposition and by creating the impression that the United States has acquiesced in the survival of Bashar al-Assad's regime and tacitly aligned itself with Tehran, galvanizing the popular base of jihadist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and IS for whom fighting Assad and the "Safavid (Iranian) threat," respectively, are rallying cries.

The U.S.-led coalition, however, is more likely to push IS underground than out of Iraq; this will pose long-term challenges to the country's stability. IS has shown that it can survive, and even thrive, as an underground terrorist network, while the Iraqi government demonstrated between 2011 and 2014 that it cannot deal effectively with such threats. Moreover, the continued survival of an IS sanctuary next door in Syria will ensure that IS in Iraq remains a viable organization. Finally, unless Iraq's political culture changes, and the zero-sum, winner-take-all approach to politics is abandoned, Iraqi politics will simply spawn the next version of IS after the latter's military defeat. So the jihadist group is likely to pose a long-term terrorist problem in Iraq, as long as Iraqi politics do not change.

While IS's defeat in Syria and Iraq would be a major setback for the organization, it would not solve the problem of IS's affiliates beyond the Levant, and might not affect its ability to inspire or wage "decentralized jihad" overseas. And it would do little to help the campaign against al-Qaeda, which would probably benefit from IS's defeat. Until the United States and its allies can figure out how to dampen the appeal of the jihadist ideology that animates a very narrow slice of the world's Muslim population—and to prevent groups like IS and al-Qaeda from reaching and mobilizing sympathetic supporters around the world—there will be no exit strategy for this struggle. Remarkably, more than a decade into the war against jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and its offspring, many aspects of this conflicts remain an enigma.

## Cultural Change and the Need for a Transformational Agenda

To deal with these challenges, the United States will need to transform its own strategic culture, and to work with local partners to transform the prevailing zero-sum, winner-take-all political culture of the Middle East. The U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has soured many Americans on the idea of ambitious, transformational agendas; yet there is no way to resolve the Middle East's problems without the kind of cultural change that will enable a politics of compromise and inclusion (though not necessarily democracy). The region's patrimonial political culture, however, will pose major obstacles to such change.<sup>234</sup>

To succeed on the Iraq and Afghanistan battlefields, the U.S. military had to alter its own institutional and organizational mindsets and cultures—for instance, relearning counterinsurgency and transforming the way Special Operations Forces do business.<sup>235</sup> Yet, in many senses, major elements of the American way of war remained unchanged: the preference for tactical and technological solutions to policy problems; defining success as the attrition or destruction of enemy forces; and challenges translating military success into sustainable political outcomes.

The political culture of the Middle East requires change if the region's civil wars are to be contained and recurrences averted. During the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. policymakers tended to focus on structural challenges—unemployment, poor education, weak service delivery, and the lack of representative institutions—and therefore defined institution building as the solution to the countries' problems while overlooking the role of other factors, such as political culture, in promoting conflict and violence.<sup>236</sup> Cultural change is, however, key to tackling the region's political problems, though how to accomplish this is unclear. One can only hope that the bloody and traumatic conflicts now convulsing the region provide the impetus for the kind of organic cultural change the region so badly needs.

Wars are often the harbinger of social, political, and cultural change that can alter a society's norms and values, transform its politics, or shift its foreign policy. The exhaustion and disillusionment with the prevailing order spawned by Europe's Thirty Years War (1618–1648) led to the Treaty of Westphalia, which provided a mechanism for

resolving disputes and thus heralded a period of relative peace in central Europe.<sup>237</sup> World War II discredited European fascism and Japanese militarism, led to the creation of functioning democracies in these former Axis states, and spawned international institutions, such as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund, that ushered in a period of unprecedented economic growth.<sup>238</sup> And the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan helped bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of communism, albeit also giving rise to the modern transnational jihadist movement.<sup>239</sup>

In the Middle East, the Arab defeat in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War led to military coups in Syria and Egypt and the rise of pan-Arabism,<sup>240</sup> the Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war led to the demise of pan-Arabism and the rise of local Arab nationalisms,<sup>241</sup> while the long and bloody Iran-Iraq War ended Iran's era of revolutionary radicalism.<sup>242</sup>

The Middle East's conflicts have transformed the region's politics—deepening sectarian polarization and expanding proxy wars—without yet yielding a silver lining. The staggering human, material, and financial costs of these wars, however, combined with long-term declines in oil prices and fertility rates in the region,<sup>243</sup> may create pressures to curtail these conflicts.<sup>244</sup> (Conversely, the recruitment of Sunni and Shiite foreign fighters by IS and Iran, respectively, and tens of billions of dollars in nuclear sanctions relief that could enable Iran to expand its proxy wars, may offset these trends, at least in the near term.)

All wars end—even religious wars. Exhaustion or defeat will eventually bring a halt to the Middle East's current round of bloodletting. Identifying ways to deescalate and “desacralize” these conflicts may help expedite this process.<sup>245</sup> And this could create opportunities for the United States and the international community to broker new political arrangements that could help curb the region's propensity for conflict and violence.<sup>246</sup>

## **Restoring Strategic Competence**

Strategy is difficult. Even under the best of circumstances, fog, friction, chance, human error, uncertainty, contingency, and the law of unintended consequences—factors intrinsic to war that make it among the most unpredictable of human endeavors—complicate the formulation and implementation of strategy.<sup>247</sup> This is especially true in the Middle

East, where an extraordinarily complex operational environment presents strategic and policy challenges that will tie the most able policy-maker in knots.

The contending orientations, preferences, and requirements of political and military leaders further complicate matters, as explained by one prominent scholar:

The military leader and planner seek clarity of purpose, sustained commitment, and consistency of objectives. The political leader hopes to preserve options, minimize risks, avoid commitments with firm obligations, and wants to extend timelines. The interaction is a litany of frustrations for the participants, and probably will always be so.<sup>248</sup>

This inherent tension is often exacerbated by differences in the background, education, religious outlook, and political orientation of many members of these two groups that are, in turn, rooted in broader divisions in American society, as well as the post-Vietnam estrangement of America's civilian and military leadership.<sup>249</sup> The result is that politicians and generals often do not engage in the kind of intimate, probing dialogue necessary to identify militarily achievable policy goals.<sup>250</sup> In the ensuing policy vacuum, military leaders tend to focus on tactical and operational objectives at the expense of strategy.<sup>251</sup>

Educational disparities also come into play. Military officers spend much of their career in professional schools studying war and strategy; even so, few top strategists have emerged from their ranks. For their part, many civilian leaders have no training at all in military strategy, and it shows. Talented civilian and military personnel who have shown promise as strategists should thus be identified and groomed for positions of greater responsibility in government. And mini strategy seminars should occasionally be held for senior civilian leaders in the national security arena to ensure they have the requisite training.<sup>252</sup> But who is going to tell a president that he or she needs to attend?

Structures shape strategy and often create impediments to success.<sup>253</sup> Recurrent U.S. failures to align ways, means, and ends, or to pursue realistic objectives, are rooted, at least partly, in organizational factors—especially the tendency of the Washington-based “interagency” to break down complex geopolitical problems into discrete “issues” (e.g., terrorism, nonproliferation, and human rights) that are dealt with within

stovepiped bureaucracies, thereby precluding holistic, regional policy approaches.<sup>254</sup> The result is a plethora of policies that sometimes work at cross-purposes, and undermine America's military campaigns in the region. Likewise, responsibility for implementing lines of operation during counterinsurgency campaigns is often assigned to military and civilian government agencies that do not always work together well or that have divergent approaches.<sup>255</sup> In both cases, the result is often outcomes that are less than the sum of their governmental parts.<sup>256</sup>

Some critics have claimed, moreover, that the U.S. military's narrow focus on warfighting has come at the expense of its ability to think strategically. According to one version of this critique, by embracing population-centric counterinsurgency, the United States has adopted "a strategy of tactics" in which tactics have eclipsed strategy.<sup>257</sup> According to another version, the interface between policy, strategy, and tactics has been hindered by the transformation of the operational level of war into a "politics-free zone" that has reintroduced the split between strategy and policy that has long hampered military thought.<sup>258</sup> Operational-level headquarters that once served as a bridge between strategy and tactics in the era of industrial-age warfare—when mass armies conducted operations spanning continents—are now impediments to the translation of strategic objectives into tactical actions. In this view, operational art has "devoured" strategy.<sup>259</sup>

## **Fixing a Flawed Process**

A comprehensive assessment of how to fix Washington's interagency policy process is beyond the scope of this paper; part of the solution, however, lies in structures and processes that facilitate, rather than hinder, a holistic understanding of the regional operational environment and an integrated approach to shaping and influencing it.

While the U.S. military employs "red teams" to question planning assumptions, joint operations planning groups to integrate planners from diverse organizations, campaign assessment teams to flag issues needing attention, and lessons-learned organizations to improve future efforts, the Washington-based interagency lacks such entities to facilitate cross-department integration and otherwise enhance policy formulation and implementation.

Creating such entities within the National Security Council, some

ad hoc, some permanent, and choosing the right people to fill them—a mix of experienced area specialists and strategists—could be an important first step toward improving the strategic performance of the United States in the Middle East.<sup>260</sup>

## Critical National Security Tasks

Washington's performance of a number of national security tasks crucial to success in the Middle East and elsewhere has been uneven, at best. There are several reasons for this:

- ▣ Many of these tasks—uprooting transnational terrorist networks, deterring motivated adversaries, and training militaries in deeply divided societies—are inherently difficult.
- ▣ The United States has failed to tailor implementation of these tasks to account for the region's culture and politics.
- ▣ The United States has often failed to innovate or update its approach in each of these areas due to bureaucratic torpor or neglect.

Given this assessment, the United States needs to rethink its approach to counterterrorism; deterrence, compellence, and assurance; security force assistance; and information operations. And it needs to rebuild its covert-action capabilities.

**COUNTERTERRORISM.** For nearly fifteen years now, the United States has been at war with al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and its offspring, such as IS. It has conducted thousands of raids, strikes, and targeted killings with drones, aircraft, and Special Operations Forces, killing thousands of terrorists. Yet the terrorists' ranks are far from depleted; to the contrary, they pose a growing threat. The United States needs to reevaluate its entire approach to the jihadist phenomenon, and perhaps place more emphasis on the nonmilitary aspects of combating these groups—especially information activities—and do more to create synergies between its military and nonmilitary lines of operation. Most of all, the United States needs to alter policies that fuel the region's conflicts and feed terrorism, thereby undermining U.S. military efforts.

**DETERRENCE, COMPELLENCE, AND ASSURANCE.** Deterrence has traditionally been most effective at preventing conventional military aggression and major wars, but those kinds of conflicts are less frequent in the Middle East than in the past. Deterrence has been less effective at preventing gray zone, irregular, hybrid, and limited conventional conflicts—the types that predominate today and likely will in the future. Deterrence will remain essential for dealing with high-end threats: conventional attacks, missile strikes, and nuclear weapons, for instance. It will be less useful for dealing with the cyber, terrorist, and irregular threats proliferating in the region today, or for dissuading potential proliferators from developing WMD. Thus, while the United States must practice deterrence more effectively, it must also be able to prevail in the kinds of conflicts that deterrence is unlikely to prevent.

Compellence will also be more difficult. Domestic and international opinion, and the proliferation of advanced conventional arms, offensive cyber weapons, and eventually intercontinental-range missiles, will place greater constraints on the use of force. In particular, cyber weapons will enable hostile states and even some nonstate actors to target the U.S. homeland. And Russia's return to the Middle East will reduce America's margin of maneuver in the region. In response to these trends, the United States needs to improve its ability to counter these capabilities through countermeasures, active and passive defense, and offensive means. And it needs to better understand what its adversaries fear most in order to more effectively influence them.

Finally, recent experience shows that there is much to be learned about the assurance of allies and partners in the Middle East. Washington is experiencing an unprecedented crisis of confidence in its relations with several traditional allies and partners in the region due to its policies of the past fifteen years. To mend these ties, future administrations will need to focus on building relationships between leaders, restoring the credibility of U.S. commitments, and reestablishing faith in American competence. The only way to do this is by dealing successfully with the region's challenges. Time will tell whether this will suffice.

**TRAIN AND EQUIP AND SECURITY FORCE ASSISTANCE.** T&E and SFA efforts will often require intensive diplomatic and military engage-

ment if they are to succeed. T&E efforts in support of insurgents will often require the United States to mediate among fractious opposition groups and their state sponsors. If the interests of the United States, its regional partners, and the insurgents are not aligned, and if T&E efforts are not tailored to the culture and operational needs of these groups, these efforts are likely to founder.

SFA to militaries in deeply divided societies is particularly challenging. If the political environment is not conducive—if a country's political leadership is intent on politicizing the military and security forces for use in domestic power struggles—even the most lavishly resourced assistance effort may fail to produce an effective fighting force.

SFA likewise needs to be tailored to the local culture. This may require work-arounds in training and doctrine for certain culturally grounded habits and norms that could otherwise hinder the creation of militarily effective units. To this end, the United States should reexamine and, if necessary, revamp its approach to training the Syrian opposition, and SFA in Iraq and elsewhere, to ensure these efforts are aligned with local political and cultural realities and reflect the local partner's operational requirements.

**INFORMATION ACTIVITIES.** Information activities are of decisive importance for America's principal regional adversaries, and are woven into nearly all their activities. Accordingly, information activities need to be central to the U.S. response and its regional strategy. America's ability to conduct information and influence operations, however, has atrophied and needs to be revived. The United States needs to be able to counter the messaging of its adversaries and to advance its own narrative. Much more thought and effort must be devoted to these activities, and civilian and military efforts in this domain must be better integrated.

Accordingly, the United States needs to do more to leverage the lethal effects of its counterterrorism and military operations to produce decisive nonlethal psychological and informational effects. This will ensure that the defeat of its adversaries on the battlefield will set conditions for their ultimate defeat in the informational and virtual domains. These nonlethal effects may, in fact, be the military's most important contribution to success against groups such as IS and al-Qaeda. The mind of the enemy and the region's populations is the key

terrain of the many Middle East conflicts, yet the United States is still not effectively competing in this arena. For this reason, psychological and informational considerations should be integral to everything the U.S. government does.

**COVERT ACTION.** The underdeveloped U.S. capability for covert action and political warfare—especially information operations and influence activities—has forced it to rely excessively on the military instrument. Here, too, the United States needs to revive former capabilities. Covert action is not a panacea, and in some places, most notably Iran and Chile, it has done great damage to America’s reputation and interests. Yet it will be critical for advancing U.S. interests in a fragmented and turbulent Middle East.

## **In Summary**

Americans often see technology as a panacea, yet the challenges the United States faces in the Middle East are not amenable to technological solutions. Rather, the experience of the past three decades shows that there is no substitute for a deep understanding of the region’s culture and politics and their implications for strategy and policy. The lesson here is that the United States needs to tailor the scope, nature, and goals of current and future military interventions to regional realities, and it must develop “ways of war” appropriate to the operational environment.

Formulating and implementing strategy is hard—especially in a region as complex as the Middle East. It is even harder when governmental structures hinder this process. Stovepiped bureaucracies produce blinkered understandings of regional developments, result in flawed policies and disjointed strategies, and hamper efforts to transform military successes into sustainable political outcomes. Structures shape strategy, and the United States needs to create policy structures that promote, rather than discourage, a holistic understanding of the region, and coherent approaches to strategy formulation and implementation.

Finally, the United States must more capably perform a number of critical national security tasks to succeed in the Middle East. For instance, intuitive or cookie-cutter approaches to deterrence, Security

Force Assistance, or information activities, uninformed by an in-depth understanding of the region's culture and politics, are apt to fail. If America does not develop tailored approaches in all these areas, it will continue to underperform in the Middle East, and could fall short in marginalizing jihadist groups such as IS and al-Qaeda and in shaping Iran's behavior. Rectifying these persistent shortcomings is a vital U.S. interest and will be key to its future success in the region.

## PART II.

# Notes

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